

FINDERS KEEPERS, A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

BLUE BOOK

FEBRUARY

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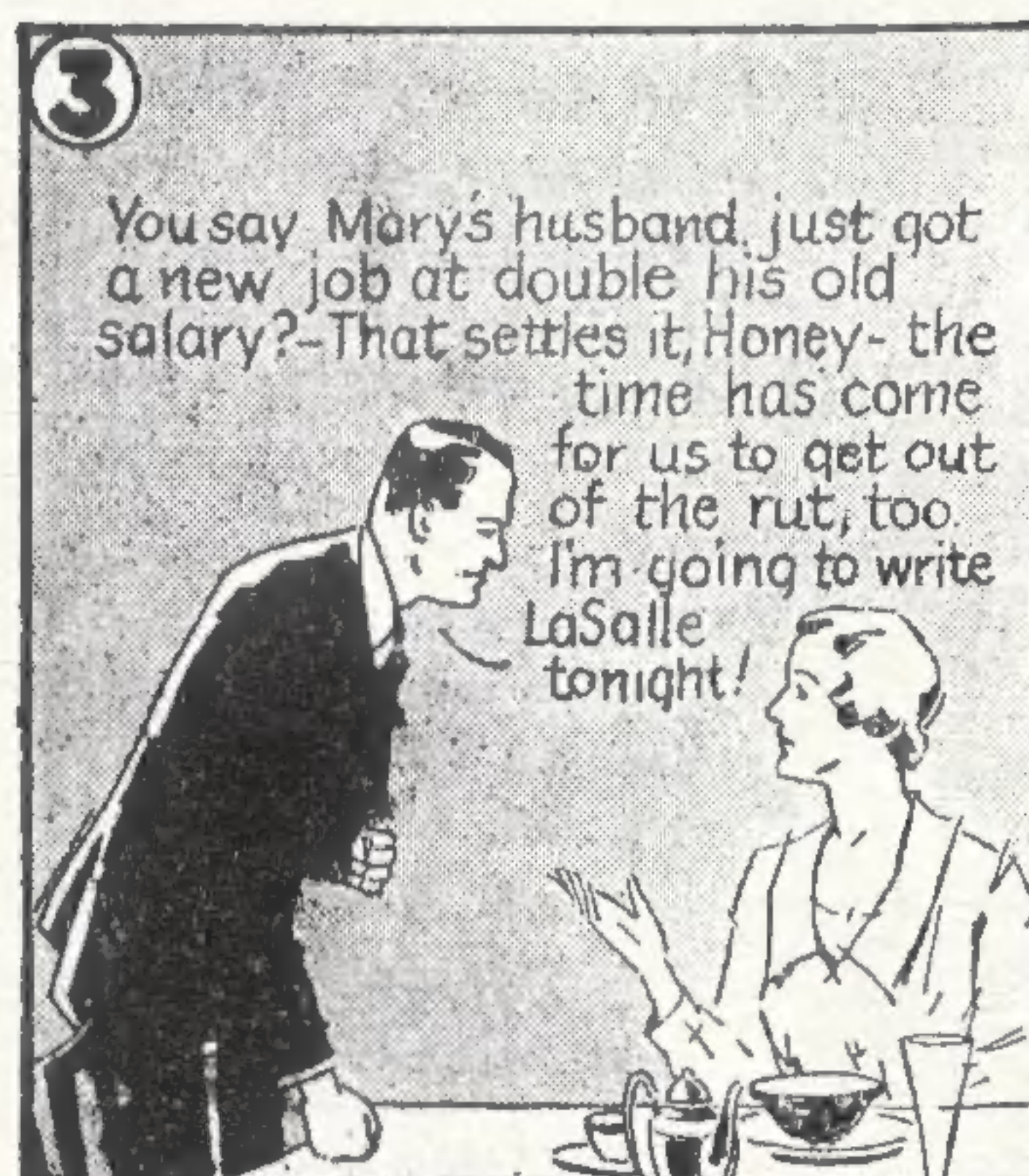
**GEOFFREY HOMES • HUGH FULLERTON • SIDNEY H. SMALL
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Y. C. Lawrence

The battleship was looming larger, rushing at top speed. . . . The submarine forged on, heading for her. . . . Then Carrick heard the diving alarm clanging. She began to submerge. (From "Submarine at Large," beginning on page 30.)

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BLUE BOOK



FEBRUARY 1940

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truth about the
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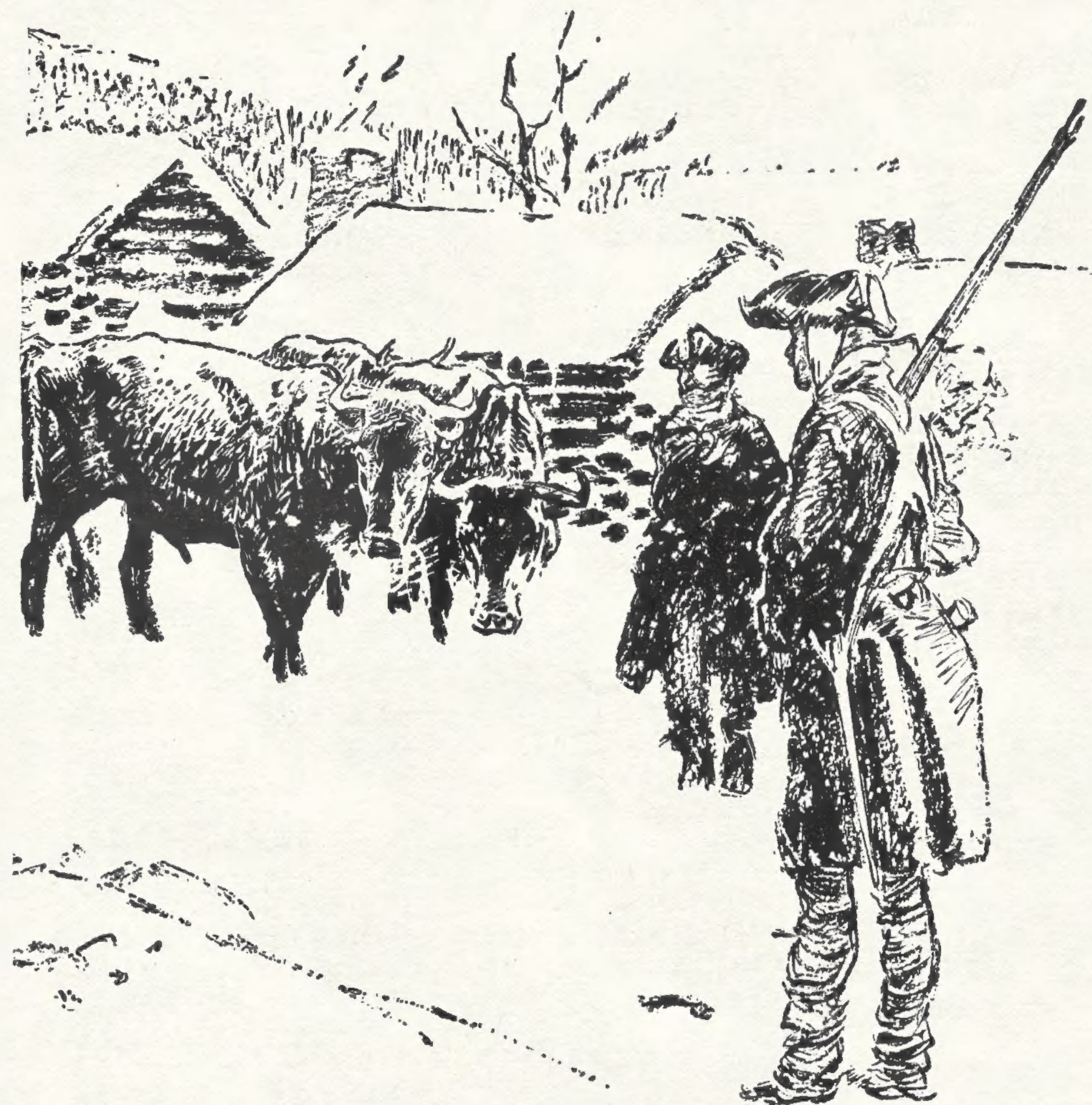
Why the Fitzaldens

IT was the Doorley's grandmammy's pappy, Old Shano Murphy, who told me the tale of how the Little People came to America, how my great-great-grandfather Alexander wooed and won my great-great-grandmother, Ellen the dark; how he and Simon Kenton, the famous scout, rescued her from the Indians; and why the Fitzaldens, even until today, are web-toed.

Shano Murphy was old then, but he was still the best man in the hill country at growing praties. He could make them grow so mealy the cook had to throw cold

water in the boil to keep them from turning to meal in the pot. The spring day was warm. Barefooted, I was crossing the pasture by the great oak trees, and on seeing Shano, commenced singing: "*I come from the County Donegal, where they eat the praties skin and all.*" As I came near the patch, I stopped and knelt with my ear close to the ground, saying a rigmarole; and Shano Murphy stopped hoeing the potatoes and said:

"Ye'll niver be after seein' the Little People that way, and ye'll niver catch one of them, at all, at all."



By HUGH FULLERTON

Are Web-Toed

"I was whisperin' to make the doodlebugs come up," I told him.

"And was that what ye were doin'?" he asked. "I thought ye were tryin' to charm the Little People."

"The Little People? What are they, Shano Murphy?" I asked.

"'Tis shamed of ye I am," he said reproachfully. "Ye, one of the Fitzaldens and of Alec's tribe, not knowing who the Little People are. They are the Leprechauns, Small Chooey."

"Granny says the Leprechauns are only in Ireland," I protested.

"Sure, but they're here too," he asserted. "Folk only say they aren't, because they do not understand the Gaildigh. They hear thim, but think 'tis the frogs croakin' or the crickets chirrin'. Their eyes are dim with lack of understandin'. Sure, and wasn't it your own grandfather's grandfather Alec that brought thim from Ireland?"

"Did he that? I never heard of it. And why cannot I catch one of the Little People, Old Shano?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"Are your toes webbed together?" he asked, resting his hoe and seating him-



self on a stump in the shade of the great oak at the edge of the patch.

"The first two toes, savin' the big toe, are," I replied, surprised at his knowing it.

"Which proves ye are a Fitzalden," said Shano, nodding his head wisely as he puffed his dudeen. "And that is why ye never can catch one of the Wee Folk."

"I do not understand, Old Shano," I said. "Tell me the tale."

"I have the praties to hoe, and 'tis a long tale," he said. "Your granny should have told ye long since."

"Please, Shano Murphy, tell me the tale," I wheedled. "Granny says they are old tales, and foolish."

"And does she now?" he asked, growing indignant. "Her that listened to the Little People many the time whin she was a bit girl. My back is achin' anyhow, and I'll rest a bit whilst tellin' ye the tale."

"Yer grandfather's grandfather Alexander was a great man," he said, his soft brogue broadening as he talked. "The blood of kings ran in his veins; kings of Ireland."

"But Granny says we are Scotch."

"Scotch, is it?" he flashed angrily. "There are no Scotch, for the Scot is but an Irishman with the joy frozen from his soul by the climate. Sure, and didn't Conor conquer the black Scot of the Highlands, and didn't one of the Fitzaldens ride at the right hand of Conor and become Laird of the Isles? And didn't Conor give him lands, so that he and his sons and their sons might fight the Sasenach and raid his cattle? But the Fitzaldens were aye lonely in that dour land, and in the isles of the sea, longin' for the sunshine and the heather and the sound of laughter, and the joy of the jig and the reel; so one of thim, Robert the

"'Tis forbidden that the Little Folk cross water," said Alex.



Red, it was, came back. His great house stood lookin' down at the sea and the isles, and below to where the Giants' Causeway stretches out toward Scotland."

"What is the Giants' Causeway, Old Shano?" I asked.

"'Tis shamed that I am of ye, Small Chooley, not knowin'. And ye a descendant of the Fitzaldens of Bushmills. . . . Do ye know who Finn MacCumhl was?"

"What has Finn MacCumhl to do with the Giants' Causeway? Was he a giant?"

"'Twas Finn himself that had the Causeway built, and he was a giant. Whin Finn wanted a bit deer for his dinner he ran out the causeway into the sea and lepped acrost to Scotland and at dusk he'd run down the Scotch mountains with a deer on each shoulder and lep back to Ireland. Often his take-off was a three-mile run downhill, and he'd run two miles slowing up. 'Tis a true tale; I had it from my own grandmother, peace to her soul!

"Folks said that when your grandfather's grandfather Alec was a boy, he was like Finn. 'Twas strange. His forebears lived long in the Highlands and came to be dour like the Scots, forgettin' the lilt of the song, and the way the sound of the pipes makes the feet jig. The family had been long in Scotland

and in the isles; but Robert came back and won for his wife the gayest and the fairest maid in all Ulster.

"Four sons were born to thim, and three were dark, dour men, like their father, and only Alec was gay and light-hearted like his mother. A broth of a boy he was, fair of hair and blue of eye; and whin he was eighteen, he sailed his wee boat into the wildest wind and came laughin' through the bars and the isles. He rode in the hunts, takin' the highest stone walls and the widest ditches with a glad shout. None could match him at wrestlin' or at hurlin' the weights. Bold he was with the colleens, with a kiss and a laugh for each pretty face, and a farewell that left thim sighin'. At the inn he drank thim all under the table, and walked home singin'. All were his friends, and he hated no one except the English."

"Why did he hate the English, Old Shano?" I asked.

"No reason is needed to hate an Englishman, except that he is English," said Shano with dignity. "'Tis shame that ye should ask. Alec hated the English for the wrongs done him and his, and longed for a chance to fight them.

"Then the word was whispered on the bogs and under the hedges, in the heather and ran across the sea, over the Highlands and from end to end of Ireland, that in America General George Washington was leading the Presbyterian revolt against the English. Recruitin' sergeants were offerin' the King's shilling to the boys to cross the seas and fight the battles of the Sassenach for him—as was ever his plan. And what with the famine and the love of adventure, some were goin', even though the hearts of most were for those who fought for freedom.

"Alec was a buck of a boy thin, and the folk said he was like Finn MacCumhl himself, and whispered that mayhap he too lepped across to Scotland to get the deer, because many a one he brought home; nor could any catch him poaching the deer, the pheasant or the salmon. And whin he heard of what was goin' on across the seas, he readied his small boat, kissed half the girls in the county good-by, and sailed away, not sayin' where."

"But Old Shano, did he take the Little People with him, as you said?"

"Sure, and I was most forgettin'," said Shano, relighting his dudeen. "Of course he took them, for two of them were bound to go wherever he wint, and to do his bidding."

"And how was that, Old Shano?" I asked.



"The all of it is unbeknownst to me," he said, shaking his head. "Long ago, whin Angus Og ruled, one of the Fitzaldens was a cunning man. He planned to catch some of the Little People to make them do his bidding. He thought of a plan, and whin he walked barefoot in the heather, he educated his toes, so that he could pick up a shillin' with them from the ground, and flip clods from the praties without stoopin'. Whin the sun shone warm, he laid himself down and pretended to sleep, knowing the Little Folk would be crawlin' over him, they bein' curious folk and always strivin' to learn what manner of animal man is. He knew that the Little People kept far from a man's hands, lest one might catch them with a quick sweep of the hands as small lads catch flies. They climbed over his bare feet, leppin' from toe to toe; and whin two of them grew too bold, he caught them between two toes, and held them, and they beggin' for mercy, tryin' blarney and threatenin' him, and him roarin' with laughin' at thought of how smart he was puttin' the comehither on the Little People.

"'Ho! Ho! 'Tis cunnin' the Little People are, but the Fitzalden is smarter!' he roared, whilst they wailed and wept, and threatened to set the evil ones on his trail. But he was a bold man, and laughed the more, till they pledged themselves that always two of the Little People should serve the Fitzalden."

Shano Murphy smoked, puffing silently, seeming to think and forget the tale he was telling.

"'Twas bitter shame to the Little People," he went on. "The Fitzalden should have known that they would even the score—and they did. Each night when the Fitzalden babies slept, the Little People crept to the cradles and tied their toes together with strong grasses, and the nurses, hearin' them wail, found them tied that way. No matter how often the nurses cut away the grass, the Little People tied it again, until in time the toes of the Fitzaldens grew together in webs like the feet of a drake, and no longer could any of them catch any of the Little Folk."

"And is that why my toes are webbed together, Old Shano?" I asked, awed by the tale.

"'Tis so—and with all your tribe."

"Will the Little People serve me, Old Shano?"

"No, Small Chooey," he said, poking the dottle deep into his pipe and sighing.



"Have patience. 'Tis the tale I'm tellin' ye of how one of the Fitzaldens caught the Little People, and how Alec, your grandfather's grandfather, and George Washington set thim free."

"Did he know George Washington?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"Sure, and didn't he! Well, whin first the Little People came to serve the Fitzaldens, 'twas with hate in their hearts; but whin Alec Fitzalden became the Fitzalden, they came to love him. They loved the bigness of him, and his great laugh, and they loved the heavy weight of his hand against a foe, and the gentleness of it to women, to weak things and to his friends.

"Nor did they fear him, indeed, but whin he lazed in the sunshine, they climbed to the broad shoulders of him, and whispered in his ear. He sang the old songs for thim, and when he walked abroad, he carried thim safe in his leather pouch; and at meat he dropped sweet crumbs and a wee spill of wine, that they might eat and drink. Whin he heard of General Washington fightin' the English for the sake of freedom, Alex was a bit sad, thinkin' of partin' with them that had served him, and said to thim:

"'It's the ocean I'm plannin' to cross, Wee Folk. And my heart is sad at partin' with ye.'

"'We would go with you, Alec Og,' they said. 'Ye have been a good master, and we would serve ye, as we promised.'

"'Tis forbidden that the Little Folk cross water,' said Alex. 'Know ye not that in all Ireland the folk break holes in the eggshells so that the Little Folk may not use them as boats and cross water?'

"'We know,' they said. 'But also we are bound to ye.'

"'Tis a point of law,' said Alec. 'And mayhap, if ye ride in my pouch, ye'll not know ye're crossin' water.'

"'And if ye close yer eyes, Alec Og,' they said, 'p'raps ye may not know we're with you.'

"'I'll strike a bargain with ye,' said Alec. 'If so be ye hide in my pouch and go with me to help win freedom, thin shall the Little People be always free from the Fitzaldens that caught ye bechune the toes.'

"Then next day Alec put sail on his wee boat, not lookin' in his pouch to see were the Little People in it, and sailed fair into Belfast harbor. The sergeant there, seein' the bigness of him, offered him the King's shillin', but Alex laughed



at him, and took ship with the Danes and Dutch, and landed safe in the river at Philadelphia.

"'Twas a strange city thin—filled with Red Coats and hireling Germans, all gay and laughin', thinkin' the Presbyterian revolt all done, and General Washington beaten."

"Why do you call it the Presbyterian revolt, Shano Murphy?" I asked. "In the school they say the American Revolution."

"Sure, 'twas what the English called it, because 'twas the Scotch-Irish that stirred things up; but for once the Irish were united, those from the North fightin' because of the wrongs done them by the English after Culloden, and those from the South fightin' for the joy of beatin' an Englishman.

"Whin Alec came ashore, he strolled around the town, none payin' him heed, thinkin' him a sailor from the fleet; and the Little People, peepin' out from his pouch, saw strange sights: black-coated Quakers with their queer hats, gray Quaker women, with eyes cast down, but niver missin' a glance from some Red Coat officer, buckskin-clad hunters and drovers from the hills, the swaggerin' English officers, and sometimes a blan-keted Indian. Whin night came, Alec

opened his pouch and said to the Little People: 'Whist, darlints, find for me where General Washington and his army are after bein'.' And they came back with word that the army was at Valley Forge, and that the spies reported that there was scant food and soldiers dyin' of cold and hunger.

"The second mornin' Alec crossed a river, dodgin' English sentries; and whin night came, he slept in the barn of a Swede farmer, who gave him food and drink and told him of the terrible time the Americans were havin', with the sickness and hunger and cold. Whin the Swede trusted Alec, he told him the way to the camp; and Alec, his heart troubled, started through the hills, and meetin' a herd of beef cattle bein' driven toward the city, he stepped boldly into the road, stoppin' the two men drivin' thim.

"'Where are ye drivin' the cattle?' he asked sternly. 'Are ye takin' thim to the rebels?'

"'We are not, sir,' they said, thinkin' him English. 'We're drivin' thim to sell to the English.'



"The Little People, peepin' out from his pouch, saw strange sights."

"'Ho ho! And are ye, now?' asked Alec. 'I misdoubt but ye're drivin' thim cattle to General Washington and the rebels.'

"'No. They are rebels; and besides, they have no money,' said one. 'We are of Mr. Penn's colony, and side with neither in war.'

"'Well,' said Alec, 'since ye side with neither, mayhap ye'd as lief sell to me as to the English?'

"'We have promised the English officer,' they said.

"'Have ye, now? Thin it's disappointed he'll be,' said Alec, tippin' the big one from his horse and sittin' on him. 'Tis shame on ye that ye would let soldiers go hungry.'

"The smaller drover came ridin' to see what the matter might be, and Alec tipped him from his horse, and tied them both hand and foot by the roadside, and he turned the cattle and drove thim over the hills and down the great swale between the hills, and down past rows of huts on the slopes of Mount Joy—where there was only sorrow. Hungry men came cheerin' from the huts as Alec, crackin' his whip, herded the cattle forward until a tall man, with a great nose on him, stepped out from a cabin, and stopped him.

"'IS it General Washington ye're after bein'?' asked Alec, smilin' his most philanderin' smile.

"'I'm Wayne,' said the man. 'Where did these cattle come from?'

"'Sure, General,' said Alec, grinnin' hearty, 'I met up with some spalpeens drivin' thim to the English, and thinkin' they'd stolen thim from you, I brought thim back.'

"'Did you know General Washington's order forbids loot?' asked Mad Anthony. 'And that the penalty is death?'

"'Sure, and anyone that loots is a thief and deserves bein' shot,' said Alec. 'But would ye be after lettin' fat cattle wander the hills, and your men hungry?'

"'I wouldn't,' said the General, smilin' grimly. 'But General Washington might. Who are you, and where did you come from?'

"'I'm Alec Fitzalden of Bushmills, sir,' said Alec, '—at your service.'

"'I'm Irish myself,' said the General. 'Why did you come?'

"'I was hopin' for a chance of fightin' the English, sir,' said Alec. 'Twas dull in Ireland, with no fightin', so I came to help General Washington.'

"‘We’ll have to see him about it, Alec,’ said the General. ‘And meantime, you boys start skinnin’ those cattle before the commander can order you not to do it. Come on, Alec, tell me about old Ireland whilst we walk.’

"They went across the swale, and down into the valley by the Forge, and walked into General Washington’s headquarters, bold as brass.

"‘Who is this man, General?’ asked Washington, lookin’ up.

"‘‘Tis Alec Fitzalden, from Bushmills, sir,’ said General Wayne.

"‘‘Twas told in Ireland ye needed men, sir,’ said Alec, bold and grinning. ‘So I came, fast as ship could sail.’

"‘We’re needin’ men, but we’re needin’ meat worse,’ said General Washington, sadly.

"‘I’m bringin’ ye both, General darlint,’ said Alec, and General Wayne told him of the cattle.

"‘Did ye steal thim?’ asked General Washington, growin’ stern.

"‘Sure not, Ginerol,’ said Alec, blarneyin’. ‘I wouldn’t be after stealin’.

"‘Ye never stole any cattle in Ireland, either?’ asked the General.

"‘No sir. Maybe a calf now and thin, and deer that strayed from His Lordship’s park, to give to some starvin’ widdy.’

"‘I see,’ said General Washington, thoughtful-like. ‘Alec Fitzalden, mayhap I have need of ye, I’m thinkin’. Mayhap ye’re more good to me bringin’ in cattle than fightin’.

"‘I would be a soldier, sir,’ said Alec.

"‘Ye may kill a few in your spare time,’ said the General. ‘Meantime, I’ll take it kindly if you’ll find cattle to feed the army. I’ll permit no raidin’, but if ye find anyone sellin’ to the British—’

"‘I understand, General darlint,’ said Alec. ‘I’ll be needin’ a pair of bold boys to help me.’

"‘Who have ye for him, General?’ George asked Anthony.

"‘Well,’ said General Wayne, thinkin’. ‘There’s Schwartz and Differdorfer, and McClanahan and Mulcahey and Casey.’

"‘I’m not prejudiced, General,’ said Alec. ‘I’ll take Mulcahey and Casey.’”

Shano Murphy paused to refill his dudeen.

"I’ll no be tellin’ you all that happened to Alec durin’ the war. ‘Twas remarkable how many cattle Alec and Mulcahey and Casey found wanderin’ in the west counties and drove in to feed the army. Alec became a man of importance, and



"Dark she is, dark as Deirdre."

whin the English finally learned they couldn’t whip George and him with Alec to bring beef to the army, the war ended."

"BUT what became of the Little People, Shano Murphy?" I asked.

"Wurra, but ye’re an impatient small body," Shano scolded. "I’m tellin’ ye the tale as ‘twas told me. Sure, they were with Alec all the time. Often Alec whispered to thim, and they crept away through the night, listenin’ to the English, and bringin’ Alec word of where to find stores and cattle. Whin it ended, the Congress told Alec he could pick for his own five thousand acres of land beyond the Ohio, so much land that, were it in Ireland, he would have been a king. He chose the land ye stand on at this minute, which at that time was all forest, filled with bear and deer, wildcats and red savages, and the only roads the ones worn by the buffalo through gaps in the hills: a fair land, unspoiled by men.

"Whin the word came, Alec took the two Little People from his pouch and set thim on a stump before him, and said: ‘Wee Folk, ye have served the Fitzaldens well, and ye are my friends. I pledged ye that should we win freedom, ye too should be free. The Little People shall serve no man again.’

"At that, they shed tears and said: ‘Ye have been kind to us and our friend, Alec Og. Since the time the Fitzalden stood at

the right hand of Conor, who was king, none has been so kind. We would serve ye always.'

"'Ye are free, Little People,' said Alec. 'In this land no man serves another against his will, save as friend serves friend. I brought ye over the salt sea, and ye shall go back to Ireland.'

"'Sure, Alec Og,' said one of the Wee Folk. 'I'd rather be wan month in jail in a free country than a thousand years in Ireland—barrin' sickness for the sight of our people and the sound of their laughter in the darkness.'

"'I'm feelin' the same way, Wee Folk,' Alec admitted. 'Mayhap, whin your people learn that in this land all are free, they will come, as my people will, to bring the laughter and the song into the wilderness.'

"'Our people would come, Alec Og,' said one.

"'Tis forbid that they cross water.'"

"'But we crossed water,' the Wee One argued, 'Ye brought us. Is it that the Fitzaldens can do what others are forbid doin'?'"

"'The Fitzaldens are law-abidin' folk,' said Alec. 'But they do not like the word *forbid*. I never broke a law in my life, except in the discharge of my duty, or mayhap a law the English made.'

"'I'm crossin' the mountains to a new land,' he said. 'Would ye be happy?'

"'We would that,' they said. 'We would joy to go with ye and serve ye as friend serves friend, could we but have some of our own people, that we might love and have wee childer to love us and pester us.'

"'Um-m-m,' said Alec, furrowin' his brow and thinkin' hard. 'I'm writin' Teddy Costigan and Shamus Moore to come and be free men, and mayhap, if



ye wrote wee letters to your Little People, they would come. Can ye write?'

"'No need to write. We will send messages, and they will come in the pouches, or ridin' the belts of Shamus Moore and Teddy Costigan.'

"'So Alex wrote letters, and in each letter the Little People put a feather from the tail of an eagle, the hair from the tail of a fox, a wee bit hair from the foot of a rabbit, and a four-leaf clover. 'Tell Shamus and Teddy to put these by a hole under a blackthorn bush whin the moon is full,' they told Alec. 'Thin our people will know, and some will come.'"

"'And did they come, Old Shano?'" I asked anxiously, as Doorley's old grandmammy's pappy refilled his pipe. "They would be lonely, with only two in all this land."

"'Whist, but ye're impatient, Wee Chooey,' said the old man softly. 'Wantin' to know the tale before it is told. But they came. Alec and his Little People came over the mountains and down the rivers, havin' adventures, and came to



"Simon, do you be
after takin' her a
bit, whilst I go
back after that
red devil."

this land which he had chosen, where the waters of the Paint flow between green hills in a great rich valley where the corn and the praties grow as nowhere else in the wide world. It was a fair land, but filled then with savage beasts and savager red men, whose screams were like those of the catamounts, and whose scalpin'-knives were sharper than the claws of the bear.

"There was war between the settlers and the red men. At first Alec saw no reason for fightin' the red Indians.

"'Tis like they love freedom too,' he said. 'And mayhap if strange folk came to take my land from me, and kill my game, and cut down my forests, I'd be after fightin'.'

"'They're but Englishmen turned inside out,' said the settlers. 'And 'tis the

Red Coats at Detroit that send them to scalp and burn.'

"'Be it so,' said Alec. 'But if they leave me alone, I'll not be after killin' them.'

"Alec with his great laugh and his gay smile cleared his land and built his cabin above the falls of the Paint, and had no trouble with the Indians, albeit the Little Folk kept close guard, creepin' into the villages of the red men and listenin', to warn of trouble.

"More settlers were comin' into the wilderness, and the Indians were driven farther from their hunting-grounds. The



mill was built at the forks, and Alec made friends, as he had in Ireland. But the Little People were not happy. The letters had long gone to Ireland, with no answer, and they were longing for the green hills and the fogs, the beat of the sea on the rocks, the smell of peat-smoke in the air, the splash of salmon leaping in the pools, the lilt of the pipes and the music of feet in the jig.

"Alec gave them no never-mind, for his thoughts were not on them at the time, but on the slim dark girl that had come to the falls, who was the daughter of the miller, a learned man, disputin' and preachin' and teachin' the childer whin the stones were not grindin'.

"She was Ellen Carboy, and her learned father had been a captain in General Washington's army; a grand man and scholar, albeit his father had been English. The girl was tall and slim, dark and shy, with no smile or joke for any lad, and she helped her father teachin' the small childer. Seein' her, all the boldness wint out of Alec Fitzalden. Whin he tried speech with her, his tongue tripped—and his heart was like to choke him.

"Alec, who had been so bold, bussin' and kissin' the colleens, hung around the mill like a great omadhaun, just for sake of seein' her.

"Thin one day in the spring Shamus Moore and Teddy Costigan came strollin' through the forest, laughin' and shoutin', seekin' Alec, and there was a great reunion. They had wandered over most of the land, lookin' for him, he havin' forgot to write where he was goin'. That night there was a celebration in Alec Fitzalden's cabin. The jugs filled with the

soul of the yellow corn were on the table. Shamus and Teddy told of the old land, and of the friends left in the Green Isle, of the colleens still pinin' for a smile and a kiss from Alec—and Alec was after askin' for news of Kathie and Sheila, of Bridgie and Ann; and learnin' that they were wed the many years, and busy smackin' childer' of their own.

"And have ye no colleens in the wilderness, Alec?' they asked. 'Sure, and we thought to find ye livin' like a Turk, with maybe a houseful.'

"There is only one,' Alec said, sighin' deep. 'She is fairer and sweeter than any that ever saw the light of the moon in Ireland. Dark she is, dark as Deirdre, and the eyes of her shine like the light of Kinsale. The hair of her is like moonlight on a black lake; her eyes are the brown of the breast of a pheasant, and her skin soft as the fur of the beaver in spring, and her step like the tread of a fawn in the grass.'

"With that, Alec heaved a great sigh, and Shamus Moore and Teddy Costigan roared with laughin', and smacked him on the back, sayin': 'Ho-ho! Ho-ho! And the great Alec is in love at last! And will she no have ye, Alec?'

"Scarce have I dared hold speech with her,' Alec said. 'She walks with eyes cast down, and not like the bold hussies that ogle all men. She is gentle and learned, and her father guards her, although mayhap if I could but make bold to talk with her, the smile would come to her eyes and the laugh from her pretty lips. For I have thought she is not happy.'

"And why, Alec Fitzalden?' Terry asked. 'Because ye're too scared to talk with her?'

“‘Tis not that,’ he made answer. ‘But the Little People say that betimes, when she is alone, she sighs deep, the sigh like that of a maid for a man to love her.’

“‘And are your Little People here, Alec?’ they asked.

“‘Sure, and yes, they are with me; for although I gave them their freedom, they still serve the Fitzaldens. ’Tis sad I am because they are so lonely, wantin’ for their own. They sint messages in my letters to you. Did ye put the things they sint as I bid ye do?’

“‘We did that, Alec Fitzalden,’ they said.

“‘And did none of the wee folk come with you?’ asked Alec.

“‘Now ’tis strange,’ said Shamus Moore. ‘I mind that in the steerage comin’ acrost, there were times when I thought I heard Little People whisper in the night as oft I heard them when I laid under the hedges!’

“‘I too,’ said Teddy Costigan. ‘I heard them laugh, and once thought they tickled my nose to make me sneeze, but wakin’, I thought I was but longin’ for the hills in my sleep.’

“Sighin’ deep, Alec opened the door and stepped out to bring another jug of the soul of the corn, and stopped sudden, his ears hearin’ a sound that brought him joy. ’Twas Little Folk he heard, many of them, and happy. They were ridin’ the field-mice, wakin’ the squirrels in their nests by whisperin’ in their ears, ticklin’ the toes of birds roostin’ in the trees, wakin’ the nestlings to drop food in their open mouths, and slidin’ down the dew-wet blades of grass, as ye slide down yere cellar door.

“One of Alec’s Little Folk was teachin’ the newcomers how to lep onto the backs

of grasshoppers and ride, and the bolder ones were droppin’ onto the horns of the deer to speed away, and others were tuggin’ at the hairs of sleepin’ bears, to make them growl.

“Alec knew thin that the Little People had received the messages and come over the sea, ridin’ in the pockets of Shamus Moore and Teddy Costigan, that they too might be free. He filled the jug, spillin’ drops for the Little People, and hurried back to the cabin to tell the grand news to Shamus and to Teddy, and callin’ out to the Little People: ‘Wee Folk, come ye here and join us, where we’re all free and all friends.’

“But scarce had they started to make merry, when there came a great poundin’ on the door.

“‘Who is there?’ asked Alec.

“‘Alec Fitzalden,’ the newcomer made answer, ‘open the door. ’Tis I, Simon Kenton, that wants ye and needs ye.’”

“**W**HO was Simon Kenton, Old Shano?” I asked.

“And ye dinnot know?” asked Shano sharply. “’Tis shameful the ignorance of ye, and ye in school already. Simon Kenton was a great scout and a fighter of Indians, and Alec knew him well, for many the time he had gone with Simon to steal horses from the Indians, holdin’ it no more a sin to steal from Indians than from the English. So he threw open the door and called:

“‘Come in, Simon lad, and meet my friends Shamus Moore and Teddy Costigan, fresh from the old sod, and a jug waitin’.’

“‘’Tis no jug for us the night, Alec Fitzalden,’ said Simon Kenton. ‘’Tis serious business we’ll be after goin’ on.’





"Before the big buck could say 'Good evenin',' Alec tapped him on the head with his hatchet."

"'What is it, Simon Kenton?' asked Alec, grown sober.

"'The red devils have carried away the white girl,' said Simon. 'They took her in the night last night, and whin I heard of it, I came for you.'

"'Which white girl, Simon Kenton?' asked Alec, with sick heart, knowin' full well. 'Was it the dark girl Ellen, from the mill?'

"'Aye,' said Simon; but before he spoke, Alec was stuffin' parched corn and flints into his pouch, and bucklin' on his knife and hatchet before takin' up his long rifle gun.

"'We'll go with you,' said Shamus and Teddy.

"'Ye know not the country,' said Simon. 'Tis best ye stay.'

"'We'll catch up horses for ye,' they offered.

"'We want no horses,' said Simon. 'Alec and I are in a hurry.'

"'We will go with you, Alec Og,' said the Little People.

"'I may have sore need of ye,' said Alec. 'Lep in my pouch, and some of ye ride with Simon.'"

Shano puffed his cold pipe, lighted it again and sat thinking.

"'Twas midnight whin they started," he said, "Simon leadin', and Alec in his footsteps, urgin' more speed; and Simon goin' so fast he was steppin' on the rabbits he scared up. They wint along the trail that Simon Kenton marked, with the moon castin' shadows from Copperas and

Slate and the hills of the Bone. All the day they kept the trail, stoppin' only to rest an hour or two, and chewin' parched corn and dried meat as they ran. The next day they wint up the river the Indians called Olentangy, and crossed the high land toward the big villages of the Miami Indians, all filled with renegades and Red Coat hirelings from Detroit, who offered the Indians pay for scalps, and for white men and women captured to be slaves or worse.

"That night Simon Kenton went with more caution, for they were near the village of the Prophet: the great dark man with one eye whose brother was the war chief. At dusk they halted, and Simon said:

"'Whist, Alec, I'll be after creepin' in to learn whether the white girl is here.'

"'I've a better plan, Simon,' said Alec. 'I'll sind the Little People to find out.'

"So Alec opened his pouch and lifted out his own two Little People, tellin' thim what was wanted, and he and Simon hid in the long grasses to wait. 'Twas late and the campfires dyin' low whin the Wee Folk came back.

"'The slim dark girl is there and safe,' they said. 'And Simon Girty, they call the outlaw, is there. There are other prisoners. Some they have burned with fire, and some they have made run the gantlet, beatin' thim with sticks, and burning thim with brands as they ran.'

"'Does the girl know we are here? Did ye tell her?' asked Alec.

"‘We whispered into the pretty ears of her that Alec Og was comin’,' they said. ‘And she said: “I knew he would come.”’ Which made Alec’s heart leap with the joy that she should know of him.

"‘A big buck sleeps in front of her tepee,’ said the Little Folk. ‘But ye can creep to the back.’

"‘Oho,’ said Alec, ‘I have a better plan entirely. Wee Folk, do ye mind how it was that the Little People made the toes of the Fitzaldens grow together?’

"‘We do that,’ they said, chucklin’ and grinnin’ at thought of it.

**“Bad cess to the luck, he
thripped over a dog, and
in a minute the camp was
astir.”**

"‘Could ye do the same to the red savages in the village, and mayhap, whilst doin’ that, rub a bit poison ivy atwixt their toes before tyin’ thim together?’ asked Alec.

"‘We could that,’ they made answer, grinnin’ joyously. ‘And p’r’aps rub a bit of nettle down the backs of their breech clouts.’

"‘It’s a grand idea,’ said Alec. ‘And I’m after bein’ beholden to ye for it. Ye will silence the dogs, and whin the moon is low, Simon and I will creep in and free the girl. So be that the savages come after us, will ye be after ridin’ thim, and whin the grass lames thim, will ye be after tyin’ their toes together ag’in whilst they stop to rest?’

"‘We take joy in servin’ ye, Alec Og,’ they made reply.”

Shano paused to smoke for a minute.

"And so it was, Small Chooey," he said softly. "Whin the moon set, Alec and Simon Kenton crawled into the village, and not a dog barked, because the Little People had spun cobwebs over their ears so that they could not hear. They cut the lashin’s of the girl, and Alec carried her to the edge of the forest, her soft arms around his neck, and her sayin’:

‘I knew you’d come, Alec!’—which was sweet music to his ears.

"‘And did they treat you well, mavourneen?’ he whispered.

"‘All except the big one who was the guard,’ she said. ‘He hurt my arms whin he tied me—all because I kicked him.’

"‘Arrah, and he did, did he?’ asked Alec. ‘Simon, do you be after takin’ her a bit, whilst I go back after that red devil.’

"‘Would ye be after losin’ all our scalps?’ asked Simon.

"‘I’m after a bit scalp myself,’ said Alec. He slipped into the village again, and was creepin’ up behind the wigwam, whin the big buck rose up and stretched himself before peerin’ into the wigwam to see his prisoner, and before he could say, ‘Good evenin’ or let out a yell, Alec tapped him on the head with his hatchet and started to rejoin his friends. Bad cess to the luck, he thripped over a dog, and in a minute the camp was astir, and whin they found the body of the big

guard, the bucks came swarmin' on the trail, yelpin' like the hounds of Killynorbeg on the trail of a fox. Alec overtook Simon and the girl, Simon helpin' her along, and Alec picked her up in the two strong arms of him and ran as he hadn't run since Lord Bruton's keepers caught him with the carcass of a deer in his arms. Yet the Indians were comin' closer, and Alec said:

"'You help her a bit, Simon. I'll bide and stop thim.'

"Alec dodged into the bushes, and soon a large buck, runnin' hard but commencin' to limp, came near. The grasses the Little People had tied around his toes were hurtin', and he stopped, bendin' over to cut the lashin's. And Alec, steppin' out of the bushes, tapped him on gently on the shaved head of him with his hatchet. A minute later another brave came and stumbled in the dark over the first one, and when he bent to see who it might be, Alec tapped him with the hatchet, and ran on, overtakein' Simon and the girl.

"What with findin' the bodies of their leaders, and their toes tied together and the poison ivy workin', and the nettlerash itchin' in their breech clouts, the savages were fair scared, thinkin' evil spirits were pursuin' thim. They cut the lashin's away, but whin they stopped to rest, the Little People tied their toes together again, tighter than ever. By noon of the next day all had turned back to the village, reportin' that the evil ones were against thim, all but half a dozen who were determined to take Alec and Simon prisoners to torture them.

"Alec and Simon were gettin' weary, what with carryin' the girl and runnin', and the Indians were gainin', when the Little Folk thought to pluck thorns from the trees and stick thim into the backs of the savages, causin' thim to stop, thinkin' bees were stingin' thim, so that in the

next day, fair sick and scared, they turned and ran, cryin' that devils were ridin' their backs. And Simon and Alec and the slim dark girl Ellen came safe back to the Falls of the Paint."

"And did Alec marry the tall dark girl, Old Shano?" I asked.

"And if he hadn't, ye wouldn't be here, botherin' me to tell the tale," said Shano Murphy indignantly. "Sure, and wasn't she your grandmammy's grandmammy, and a great lady, loved by all the big people and worshiped by all the Little People who had helped save her, because she was Alec Fitzalden's bride—"

SHANO MURPHY paused in the telling of the tale. Then he rose from the stump and kicked a clod angrily and said:

"Shame on ye, Small Chooey, goin' to slape whilst I'm after tellin' ye a true tale."

"I wasn't asleep, Old Shano," I protested. "I but closed my eyes the better to listen, hoping mayhap to hear the Wee Folk movin' in the grass."

"'Tis sleepin' ye were," said Shano indignantly. "And after I had stopped hoein' the praties to waste my time tellin' ye tales, and the bugs eatin' the praties."

"But I didn't sleep, Old Shano," I argued. "For not a hoe did you touch to the praties whilst my eyes were closed."

"And is it chargin' me with loafin'?" he demanded angrily. "Sure, and I'm no slave to the Fitzaldens, nor bound to thim as the Little People were. 'Tis a free land, and I'll no be driven! And 'tis a hot day. T'ell with the praties! I'm goin' uptown to the inn and get a wee drop to ward off the heat. Unless mayhap, Small Chooey," he added, "ye may know where His Honor, yer father, kapes the decanter."





JUMBLEBUG

Usually he landed right side up; but sometimes trouble tripped him.

By RICHARD
HOWELLS WATKINS

THE green car rolled. Sparrow Earle felt it coming. Against his better judgment he fought for control to the last. It was only because he was a small man, and quick-moving, that he was able to fold up in the bucket seat in time to avoid being flattened out.

Not even when the job landed on its wheels again did it quit rolling. It went on over, with Sparrow clinging to the wheel as tightly as the tape that bound it. At last, at long last, the car thudded to a stop on its side near the top of the bank on that curving half-mile track.

Sparrow cut his switch, slid out onto the dirt and brushed up his goggles. The smashed tank was gushing gas. In his eyes, so blue that they seemed touched up and phony, was a look of incredulity as he surveyed his newly purchased racing-machine. He hadn't been wheeling it that hard. And no shoe had blown. He pulled off his crash helmet and laid a scrawny hand on his spiky, shiny yellow hair, which always looked as if it had been peroxidized.

Ray Boyle, who had also been practicing hitting the bends on the revamped dirt half-miler that morning, pulled up

beside the crash rail. As he climbed out, Sparrow snapped back into character. Casually he flicked a finger at the top of his padded headgear.

"Had a horse-fly on my helmet," he said lightly. "And did I fix him!"

That was what they expected from Sparrow Earle. Iron-man stuff. With pronounced nonchalance he strolled away toward the pits. Privately he studied the track down by the infield fence. It looked all right. A quarter of the way to the front stretch Wheelock, his mech', a clumsy-looking man with long hands, dropped off the tow-car and came floundering up to him. There was nothing nonchalant about Wheelock. His eyes were popping.

The tow-car had gone on toward the overturned racer. There was nobody else within earshot.

"Give it a look," Sparrow Earle said grimly to Wheelock. "Use both eyes. I wasn't stepping fast enough to roll a marble. We've got something there and I don't mean prize money."

"I never seen a barrel do better," Wheelock mourned and hurried on.

Back at the pits, Sparrow Earle peered into a chunk of mirror, wiped a few spots of oil off his face and then washed away the red dust that spurting rear wheels had been kicking up. With care he tied his black necktie under the collar of his blue shirt and climbed into his blue serge coat and vest. Then he took a taxi back to Jeff Wick's hotel in the center of the big anthracite town.

There, with dignity, he went to the telegraph office and wired fifty-two of his seventy-two dollars to his mother. This, as Wheelock would have realized, was a bad sign. It wasn't so much filial duty as reluctance on the part of Sparrow to enter a hospital with much money on his person. There wasn't any particular reason, Sparrow would admit, why he didn't like to enter a hospital with money in his pocket. But he plain didn't like to. And he felt a hospital coming on. His sun-tan hadn't had time to darken since the last hospital session, but that didn't mean he was exempt.

"That heap had no right to roll," he warned himself. "But she rolled."

HE felt in need of confidence. Privately he slipped a bellboy a quarter to page him.

"Not Sparrow Earle, huh, sir?" said the boy, staring down at him. He had paged for Sparrow before.

"No; not Sparrow Earle," Sparrow said with emphasis. "That's just a fool notion of some newspapers. Mr. T. T. Earle."

"Nobody'll know you, sir," said the boy, departing.

That wasn't the point. Sparrow sank down into a chair in the lobby. His short, wiry body hardly made a dent in its softness. He listened luxuriously as his name, starting in crescendo at the desk, dwindled slowly as the boy headed away into the alleys and byways of Jeff Wick's hotel. Soon it would return, on a rising note: "Mr. T. T. Earle!" It was like a brain-massage. "Mr. T. T. Earle!"

That jalopy shouldn't have rolled.

THE boy came back. He gave Sparrow a good quarter's worth, but finally approached the corner where Sparrow was waiting. Sparrow signaled him. It wasn't until then that he noticed that Russ Garvin was trailing the boy.

The big driver was grinning all over his face. That wasn't Russ Garvin's usual style at all. His shoulders looked as broad as a mantel, and his head like a rather small clock on top of it. Russ Garvin, winner of third money at Indianapolis in a car Sparrow should have driven. Well, next year—

"My! My!" said Russ Garvin heavily. His eyes had a reddish gleam of malice in them. "Here I go chasing this boy to see what a guy named Tee Hee Earle looks like, and it turns out to be my old track-mate Sparrow!"

He laid a hand on the bellboy's epaulettes that made him wince.

"Know who this is?" Russ asked, pointing a finger like a nightstick down at Sparrow. "This four-footer is Sparrow Earle, the great racing driver; and when I say he can roll 'em, I mean sideways. Sideways!"

He dismissed the boy with a shove.

The man wasn't drunk. He didn't drink. He was happy.

"You hear things fast," Sparrow Earle said with sudden thought.

Russ Garvin roared. He slapped his big hands together. "Where you're concerned, four-footer, I do more than hear things," he said and roared again. "Want to buy another car?"

Sparrow considered that remark in the brief interval before Russ Garvin spoke again.

"Try riding it out in a grandstand seat this afternoon, Sparrow," Russ Garvin ad-



"Try riding it out in a grandstand seat this afternoon, Sparrow," Russ Garvin advised.

vised. "You could pass on a half ticket, easy."

He walked away, still pleased with himself.

Sparrow Earle didn't get it. In the dirt they said it with speed. The motors did the roaring. But Russ Garvin seemed sure that he had put over something.

SPARROW was still sitting tight when Wheelock arrived. The mechanic was excited. His rush across the lobby did a potted palm no good.

"D'you know whose car we bought?" Wheelock demanded.

"Russ Garvin's," said Sparrow.

Wheelock stared. "I just got the dope by the grapevine route. It was meant to leak to you before you broke your neck. The car used to be Corny Endt's—and out on the Coast it rolled on three pilots.

Three of 'em. Corny's wife—widow—Corny's family sold it to Russ Garvin. And Garvin was back of that garage man that unloaded it on us. That's the part we weren't supposed to hear—but Garvin's Swiss mech' opened up last night on too much beer."

"What's wrong with the car?" Sparrow demanded.

"What's wrong? A nice hot alligator—only she rolls. Don't you get it? Your money's sunk in a man-killer, while Russ Garvin scoops easy purses on the dirt tracks. You're the only one that feeds him much dust in this circuit."

"What's wrong with the car?" Sparrow repeated. "Are you a mechanic or a witch-doctor? If she rolls there's a reason for it. A high center of gravity."

Wheelock scrubbed his chin. "There's such a thing as a hard-luck heap," he

maintained. "Plenty have tried to dope it. But give me a couple o' weeks—"

"We've got a race on our hands today," Sparrow interrupted.

"No sir!" Wheelock declared. "No race today! Didn't I see you take it this morning?"

Sparrow didn't answer at once. He pawed at the improbable straw-colored hair that detracted so much from his dignity. This pushed it out in spiky tufts like a hard-used doll's toupee.

"You don't know Russ Garvin, Bill," he said, much more to himself than to the worried mechanic. "And sometimes I think Russ knows more about me than I do. He's smart. Russ didn't pull this trick on me to do me out of a few hundred dollars dough, or keep me out of a few races. He did it to nail me down for keeps."

"Meaning what?" muttered Wheelock in bewilderment.

"I'm good," said Sparrow. He meant it. "On my nerve I'm the best of the young speed pilots. And Russ is nearly as good on muscle, the big car-wrestler. He knows that if he can once get me balking and shying away from him, he'll have the edge as we go on up the line, to Indianapolis and the big-time stuff all over the world. He'll ride me the rest of my life."

There seemed to be a mixture of glinting blue ice and sparkling blue fire in his eyes as he turned them on Wheelock.

"We race today if I have to hold up the car with my hands," he said through his teeth. "Russ has been here calling me a four-footer. A four-footer! I won't take that from anybody, or half of it from Russ. We race today."

Wheelock shivered. "Pass it!" he counseled. Out of the corner of his mouth he added softly: "Wasn't I the one that measured your height last July? It would take a crack on the skull to make a five-footer out o' you without them thick soles and high heels, anyhow. Pass it!"

Sparrow bounced out of his seat. "What is this—blackmail?" he snapped. "I'm telling you we wheel!"

Wheelock shook his head. "You wheel and I quit," he said stubbornly. "I'm no undertaker's assistant."

Sparrow dropped suddenly into the chair and again fumbled absently at the bristling yellow spikes on his head.

"Just today, Bill," he said at last, his voice hardly audible. "After today I'll sell her. Meanwhile, we'll stow some



At first sign of Boyle's bid, Sparrow opened up too. This was it—one way or another.

lead ballast along the left member of the frame and see what we can do with air pressure in the tires to hold her down."

"How do you know you'll sell her?" demanded Wheelock. "An' how about the poor guy that buys her?"

Sparrow's voice was like a saw hitting knots in a board.

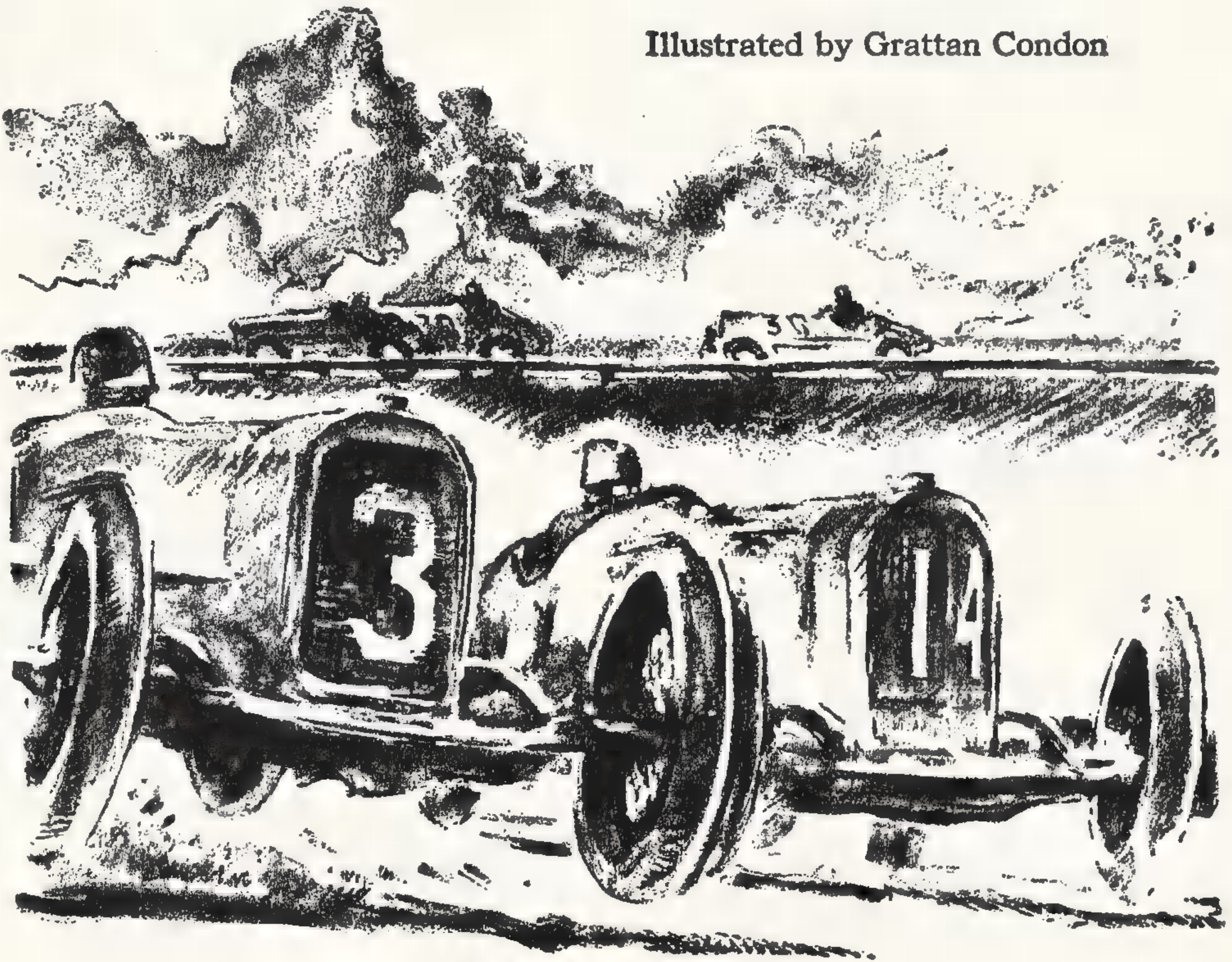
"Somebody sold her to me, didn't they? I'll sell her!"

It was plain that Wheelock's mechanical mind was straying over the ballasting problem. He nodded at last, reluctantly.

"I'll stick," he said and immediately found himself following Sparrow out of the hotel.

THE idea was to get the car away from the track that morning to some spot where they could work on her in private. But even after they had hooked up a tow-rope, Sparrow lingered in the judges' stand, looking toward the track entrance for Russ Garvin's rig.

When Sparrow descended, he came with a rush. "Come on," he said and gunned his tow-car across the track and around the far corner of the grandstand. Wheelock rode behind in the racing-car, steering gingerly. Once out of sight of the pits Sparrow slammed on the brakes and jumped out.



"Quick, now, we turn her over!" he commanded. "Quick!"

With the aid of a tow-car and rope, it was no trick to roll the green car onto its side. But they had hardly finished when Russ Garvin's rig, a light truck with his robin's-egg blue speedster mounted on it, rounded the big grandstand.

Garvin's mech' tramped on his brake at the sight of the overturned green car. Garvin stared with even greater interest.

Sparrow, beside the mournful sight, nodded curtly to them.

"She flopped over again," he said. "Just being towed around a curve. Not so good."

Garvin nodded, grinning.

Sparrow shook his head gently. "Looks as if I'll have to handle her on two wheels, like a motorcycle, this afternoon," he said with humorous anticipation.

"You mean you're going to start?" Russ demanded.

"And finish," Sparrow replied. "Am I the lad to do it, too!"

"Go roll your heap, then," Russ Garvin retorted. He dug his blank-faced mechanic in the ribs and roared with laughter. "Get it, Fritz? I told him to go roll his heap."

"Yah!" said Fritz and got the truck under way.

It took two hours to get some lead ballast thoroughly fastened to the left side of the green car's frame. When they got back the time trials—one-lap races against the clock for starting positions in the qualifying heats—were already on. The grandstand was raucous with impatient fans. Sparrow was met with the news that Russ Garvin had taken his blue mount around in twenty-nine seconds flat, good going for that soft and none too smooth saucer.

IMMEDIATELY the starter was on Sparrow's neck. No smart racing official ever kept his eyes off Sparrow Earle very long at a dirt track.

"If that iron hasn't got square wheels, get out there and ape!" this harried gentleman, Ted Slater by name, requested in a big hurry. "And no stalling, shortcuts or double crosscuts, Sparrow! I'm watching you!"

"The name is T. T. Earle," said Sparrow. "And you wrong me, Mister."

"I'd like to wrong you with an ax!" growled the starter.

"The customers wouldn't like it," Sparrow said, flicking a hand at the grandstand of fans just then applauding him with mouths, hands and feet.

Slater scowled. The customer is right at the dirt tracks, too.

Sparrow restored his dignity by taking two warm-up laps and two re-checks before he really opened up his mount. By that time most of the other pilots were looking him over. Sparrow went past the starter with plenty of zing. But instead of diving toward the infield fence on the first bend he juggled histrionically with his wheel and hit the curve high on the banked slope. His mount felt reasonably steady under him but, grinning under his goggles, he kept on riding high. He did his uncorking early on the back straight and grabbed frantically for his handbrake just before the corner came up.

In spite of the brake, for a tense moment his green car headed for the twelve-by-twelve timber that was the crash rail at the top of the track. He clawed away from it with a couple of inches to spare and ran on, at almost the top of the banked turn. He didn't kick his mount in the pants again until he was around on the grandstand stretch.

Pulling into the pits after the trial, he turned sharply. Next instant, as the car teetered on two tires his quick touch on the wheel twisted it clear of Russ Garvin's blue racer. He stopped with locked rear wheels sliding on the grass.

"Sorry!" he said lightly to the black-browed Garvin. "Too much hop—this automobile."

Garvin grinned suddenly. "Thirty-one and four-fifths is what you did, four-footer. You'll be a riot—down in the third heat fighting off the boys with the woodshed-built jalopies."

"I never hot up till the main event," Sparrow retorted. "There's something about main events—" He gunned away.

THE fans booed the announcement of his time with unison and hatred. Sparrow, the hero, was now a black coward who should have his goggles and helmet torn from his craven head.

Wheelock was in mourning. "You'll never sell it today," he predicted sourly, "although there are a couple o' young saps millin' around with no brains and some money looking for a hunk of iron."

"Don't encourage 'em," Sparrow instructed him. "I don't want anybody to know I'm going to sell this automobile. I've got to be coaxed."

Wheelock grunted. His conscience was bothering him.

Out of the corner of his eye Sparrow made out that Russ Garvin was lighting a large black cigar. Russ didn't usual-

ly mix the aroma of smoke with the keener scent of hot castor oil until after the last checkered flag of the day.

Sparrow sat tight in the pits during the first qualifying heat, watching indulgently. In that five-mile whirl Russ Garvin took the purse from Ray Boyle with no more trouble than a little brush in the first lap. The other cars were out-classed. The boys in the second heat threw dirt in a more even battle.

SPARRROW EARLE competing in the lowly third heat was news in that circuit. But all the watchful pilots saw that was in the least out of the way was Sparrow stopping his mount to get out and kick his right front and right rear tires with an uncertain toe. Then he conferred privately with his mech'.

That heat was a grim duel for first place between two cars and a procession for the man who took a bad third place. And the man in third spot was Sparrow Earle. He never menaced the two young men in home-built clunks who fought it out, wheel and wheel, for first, and he was never approached by the three sorry jalopies behind him.

Cautious was the word for his wheelwork. Cautious! He qualified for the main event without honors. The grandstand clamored for his yellow blood.

When he turned into the pits Sparrow got out and kicked his right front and rear rubber again and harder. Then he sailed into his mechanic. Sparrow riding his mech' instead of his mount was more news.

Russ Garvin didn't miss it, either.

"Come on, come on, come on, come!" said Ted Slater in a frenzy to get the boys going in the consolation. He ran off the race more on his own steam than on the gas of the contestants. But, impatient as the starter was, he was in a dream of peace compared to Sparrow Earle.

Sensation! Sparrow, that cocky little iron man, was practically kicking his slugs through his block, a process usually indulged in only by an overdriven and overheated motor. His physical impatience—or was it something else?—was enough to burn the bearings out of his scrawny legs, and he seemed to be playing "She loves me, she loves me not," with his over-yellow hair. Thrice again he smote his right rubbers with his foot and then, almost, his mechanic. After that he had a good bit of air let out of his left front and rear tires.

His green car, though doomed to start in ninth place, was first out onto the track as the consolation boys, with limping crates, trickled back into the pits. Sparrow scuffed up the dirt.

A few faithful followers in the grandstand called upon him to prove that his liver was not white—but the great majority were hot to have him boiled alive. They wanted thrills in the main event.

Everybody was watching Sparrow Earle now. Many of the pilots did so with enjoyment. For once the cocky little runt's cockiness was submerged in agitation.

Only Russ Garvin was not particularly amused. He was thoughtful as he took in the cat-fits of Sparrow.

When Russ directed his pitmen to roll his smart-looking car of robin's-egg blue out into pole position on the track his eyes were sharply cornered on the top-heavy green machine and the temperamental pilot. It was apparent that Sparrow was perked up and prancing to make a supreme effort—and a supreme effort on a narrow half-mile track can be exceedingly unpleasant to all contestants.

Ted Slater, with the impatient grandstand riding him like the old man of the sea, performed prodigies of energy in tearing the mechanics loose from the vitals of the contesting cars.

AT the last moment, amidst smoke, hot oil, high tension and screaming motors, Bill Wheelock rose to great heights of conversation, for him.

"I'm not askin' you to be careful, Sparrow," he yelled in his pilot's ear. "Just don't reach for more'n one miracle a lap."

"She's solid as a church with that ballast in her, and I've got 'em all crossing me off in the race," said the four-feet-eleven-and-three-quarter-inch driver coolly. "I'll be coasting all the way."

Wheelock popped his eyes at him. "Not more'n—one miracle—a lap," he croaked and backed away from the side of the throbbing car.

Sparrow, that deceitful actor, was clawing feverishly at his helmet and goggles when Russ Garvin turned his head for a last appraising look at the field. Beneath the pretence Sparrow was cold—cold to the heart. He still had that hospital feeling. But he must win this one or quit. Garvin had put it up to him and he had picked up the challenge. A little man has got to be better than a big man.

After a dreary century Ted Slater got the ten cars away on the warm-up lap.



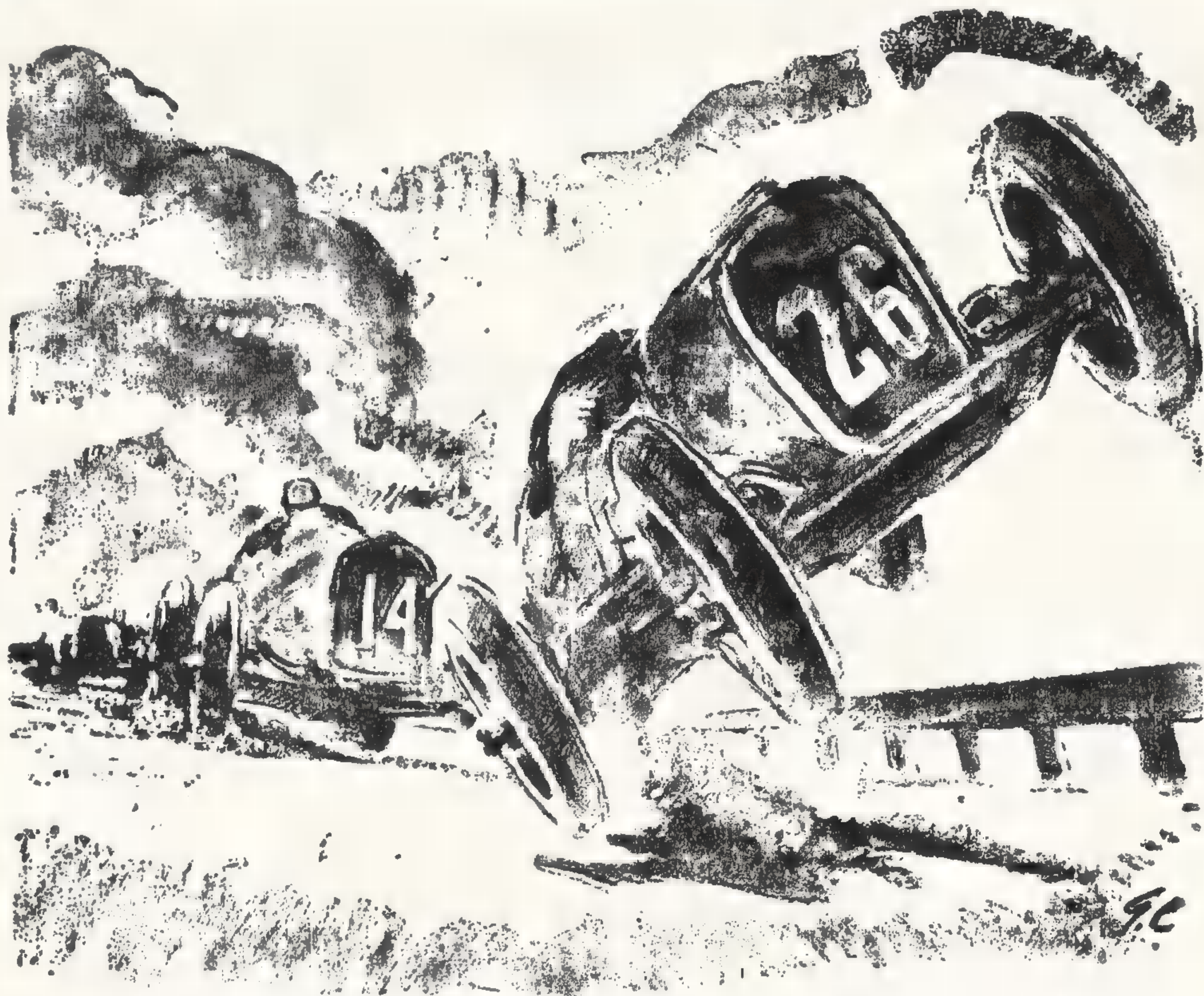
With all his hard-won skill Sparrow drove on. . . . Finish!

Having a car with lots of hop to it, Russ Garvin kept the pace well down. At almost a crawl he neared the starting line with the field bunched, two by two, behind him.

As Ted Slater, after a glance up at the judges' stand, gave them the green flag Russ Garvin planted a heavy foot on his accelerator pedal and went away. Ray Boyle, outside him, held almost level with him but in the ranks behind there was instant, weaving chaos.

Sparrow Earle, back in the fifth row with a fast car under him, did a lot of the weaving. Like a green shuttle he sent his car hurtling ahead among slower threads of different hues. Through the pall of red dust kicked up by screeching tires, he surged down the straightaway. Only as the first curve rose up ahead of him did he ease his pace. He hit the bend high, making a wide turn of it.

It was just as well that he did. The orange car that had started in fourth position, jammed too close to the infield fence, put on a protesting spin that blocked half the track. It took driving to miss but Sparrow and the cars behind



Sparrow felt her going, but his hands had no magic to force her down. He ducked.

accomplished the feat. The orange car wound up the gilhooley with a thump into the fence. It stayed there, its silent bulk replacing the rails it sent flying into the safety area inside the track.

RIDING the rim, Sparrow sized up the race. Of the ten starters only four were now screaming on ahead of him. Russ Garvin held the lead, boring through clear air down by the infield fence. A couple of lengths behind him rode Ray Boyle, bucking the better car with too much throttle foot and not enough skill in his wheelwork. Behind Boyle came a couple of veteran gas rats skittering along so close that a blanket would cover both their cars.

Sparrow cut down the bank and gunned his mount with a sensitive foot. His arms, tensing on the wheel, felt out the steering. Every nerve and muscle in his body was alert to catch the first hint of trouble in his top-heavy mount. But the hidden lead ballast kept her down at that gait.

Satisfied, he drifted higher on the bank. On the back stretch he kicked her on to within a few lengths of the two battling gas rats. There were twenty-nine laps to go.

Russ Garvin, up front, wasn't opening much of a gap. Sparrow settled down in the lurching, bouncing car to get all he could out of her with the least danger to his connecting-rods, essentials affectionately known in the speed trade as galloping irons.

Ray Boyle was working hard. Garvin had the gun to pull away from him. But instead Garvin was saving his mill. He was wearing Boyle down with the blast of dirt and pebbles from his churning rear wheels.

By now the scrimmage of the two gas rats ahead of Sparrow had become a grudge fight. On the bends their sliding wheels menaced each other; there wasn't enough difference in power or skill to permit the leader to pull clear of his dogged hanger-on.

Since Russ Garvin knew the frailties of the green car, Sparrow held the pace by winding her up on the straights and lagging, high on the bank, in the bends.

"That's what Russ expects," Sparrow told himself.

Slitted behind his dusty goggles, Sparrow's eyes watched everything. Laps whirled past. Garvin was getting set to lap a couple of tail-enders. The first one Garvin took on a bend. With Ray Boyle

riding his tail, Garvin could not wait to get the tail-ender on one of the straights, where the passing was healthier. But that overtaking was easy. The lagging car slowed and clung tight to the infield fence to avoid trouble. The next one, though outclassed, showed fight.

SPARROW'S eyes glinted to see Garvin, picking up this car on a bend, pull wide of the infield fence to keep Boyle behind him. Then Garvin eased pace perceptibly. Boyle, smothered in dust, never noticed that. Garvin let the tail-ender hit the straight before he passed him. It was human enough to dodge the risk of the slower car sliding up into him on the corner. But Garvin was finding that race soft. And he was riding it that way.

The race roared on. Sparrow's scrawny body ached with the strain of controlling his bucking, wayward wheel. Tires, skittering on the curves, flung up mounds of dust, like ploughs slicing through soil. Ruts deepened; the bumps got tough; the dust-cloud thickened over the track. A car fighting for sixth place spun out of it into the crash rail and dumped its driver over the top; he got up again, but his front axle was shot. Another pulled into the pits with a rubber in ribbons. Fifteen miles? It was eternity. Sparrow's mind wearied from the need of studying that rutted brownness and of beating momentum and centrifugal force to the draw.

Of a sudden the roar of the exhaust of one of the gas rats' cars dead ahead of Sparrow took on a higher, sharper note. Sparrow's dusty ears caught the change through all the blaring bedlam of the race. That sound meant that a head gasket had blown; the car was losing compression. Instantly his foot jammed down on his throttle. His mount went surging up on the two machines ahead. The unlucky pilot with the gone gasket started to lose speed. And simultaneously, as Sparrow had reckoned, his rival eased for an instant the intolerable anguish of the battle by lifting his throttle foot. And in that brief moment Sparrow took them both on the corner in a snarling burst of speed. He felt the hurtling steel body under him swaying dangerously, but the leaden ballast on the frame checked its lift in time. That ballast was his ace in the hole.

Six seconds later he was belting innocently down the straightaway in third place. But Garvin, still riding on top

of Ray Boyle, was suspicious. He kept looking back and looking back isn't the sort of thing a man usually does much of on a bending dirt half-miler. Russ Garvin, though he hadn't seen the actual passing of those gas rats, suspected that the top-heavy car had done the overtaking on a curve.

Ted Slater was out on the track with a couple of wrapped flags under his arm. He raised five fingers as Sparrow Earle zoomed past. Only five laps to go!

"Time to get into this race," Sparrow warned himself. But he could not win by speed alone. Not against that blue speedster and Russ Garvin's heavy right foot. The big pilot had a lead on him of almost the length of a stretch.

Sparrow gave Russ a lap to quiet down. Having Ray Boyle on Russ' neck helped to keep him occupied. But with each curve the weary Sparrow forced his mount to drift out onto the stretch at a faster clip. That way he picked up a few lengths. He hoped it would look to Garvin as if he were still making time on the straights alone.

Ray Boyle, too, knew the end of the race was looming up. And of a sudden he went out to win. He had been uncorking all he had on the stretches merely to stay with Garvin. Now he unloaded on a curve. He challenged mightily to get out of that purgatory of flying grit into the clean air of first place.

AT first sign of Boyle's bid, Sparrow opened up too. This was it—one way or another. Boyle barreled into the bend, practically broadside, and grabbed control of his mount with wheel and kicking rear end in time to draw level with Russ Garvin. But Garvin, on the shorter inside course, held him off. He, too, poured in the gas. Sparrow Earle, swirling into the corner himself, made out through the leaping dust Garvin's big, muscled body straining to check the rebellious writhings of his car. He was over-controlling, but had the strength to get away with it. The snarling, hard-pressed cars ate into the few laps that separated them from the checkered flag.

For the first time in that race Sparrow dived toward the infield fence. There, if the car would stay on its wheels, the going was shortest and not as rough. His quick reaction-time helped, though his lesser strength hindered his wrestling with the wayward surges of his mount. Sparrow still held precarious command over her.

Russ Garvin had been coasting along too easily to have felt out the track like a pilot who must nurse every tick in a second. That helped Sparrow. He managed to crawl up close while Garvin had his hands full in standing off Ray Boyle.

IN the midst of his battle for the lead Boyle somehow sensed or saw that Sparrow Earle was riding up on him. That was too much for that grimy, short-tempered pilot. He kicked his job too hard. Helplessly he went sliding up the bank—a costly, time-consuming slide. With all his might and skill Boyle fought back to control and, at the expense of speed, clawed down off the bank toward the infield fence to block off Sparrow.

But Sparrow wasn't trying to pass him inside. Sparrow knew that bank. He had been riding on it all day. He used his knowledge to gun his mount past Ray Boyle on the long rough route above. And that, with a little wheelwork coming out of the curve, put him on Russ Garvin's tail at the start of the backstretch.

But Russ Garvin was aware of danger now. And Garvin stood him off on the hurtling dash toward the next curve. Once on the corner, Russ rode a few feet wide of the infield fence, to make it harder for the car behind. And it was hard. Riding in that blast of grit from Garvin's wheels, the exhausted Sparrow knew he had only a slim chance of passing. He could see little but the red, spurting dirt that cut his face.

Drifting out of the bend into the grandstand stretch Sparrow slid too much. The skid cost him a couple of lengths. He had won back only one length as they blasted past the starter's blue flag into the last lap. One lap to go—two curves—two stretches!

Sparrow's slide had eased the pressure on Russ Garvin. Apparently Garvin had time to use his head on that blazing shoot down the straightaway. He knew well the weakness of Sparrow's top-heavy car. Now he roared into the curve much further away from the infield fence than on the previous corner. To the grandstand it would look as if he were giving Sparrow a sporting chance to cut inside him. But by riding wide he reckoned he was blocking the only path that the ill-starred, man-killing car could take—outside up on the bank.

Sparrow grinned. The blast of grit from the wheels ahead cut his parted lips. He thinned them and bunched his meager muscles for a final effort. The

heavy lead in her was his one trump. He leaned far out of the car, to the inner side.

"Stay with me, ballast!" he muttered. Jamming down the throttle, he dived toward the infield fence. His front wheels churned inside Garvin's rear wheels; he was out of their scouring wake at last. On he skittered, with the fence a blur close beside his leaning body. His car pulled level with Russ Garvin's; then inched ahead. His jarring rear tires were crawling up even with Garvin's radiator. His heart was in his mouth, but his arms stayed strong. He needed only a second more.

And then, of a sudden, he felt the car lifting under him. It wasn't sliding up the bank; the inside wheels were rising off the dirt. He felt her going, but his hands on the wheel had no magic to force her down. At that pace the ballast had failed to subdue the cranky car.

Sparrow ducked and clung. The dusty world whirled. Things grew dark, then lightened again as he cringed from the thud of his rolling car. He was beaten, sick, cowed, fighting only to live. His thin little body, flattened down in the seat, escaped crushing in the dirt. The car jarred back onto its wheels briefly; then bounced on toward the crash rail.

SPARROW came to life. The car had bounced, not rolled on over again! His hands swung the wheel; he managed with a mighty wrench to prevent the second roll. That much the ballast on which he had counted had stiffened the top-heavy job.

Hot water from the crushed radiator top stung and burned his face and chest. His one idea was to save his life. With a speed-pilot's quick instinct, he darted a glance around.

His car had rolled dead ahead of Russ Garvin's; now Russ, swerving toward the infield fence, was desperately close. He saw Russ' mouth, beneath his goggles, contorted in a tragic grimace as Russ' body stiffened to jam on the brakes. That mouth somehow looked worse than Sparrow Earle was feeling. His heart came back.

Sparrow's throttle foot beat Sparrow's brain to the command. He jerked the car away from the crash rail. Bad as he was, the other man in that tight moment looked worse. If the old job would only ape!

There was gun under his throttle foot and rubber still on his wheels. He blared

on. With the radiator washed out, the motor would burn up, rods, pistons, bearings and rings, but maybe not in one lap. Flinching under the sting of the flying water, he built up his speed before Russ Garvin could lift foot and hand from his brakes.

On the backstretch Russ Garvin came after him, climbing on it, going to town. He had too much throttle for Sparrow to stand him off. The next corner came up fast—the last bend in that race!

Grimly Sparrow edged toward the infield fence. Through his dizzy mind flitted Wheelock's warning, not to reach for more than one miracle a lap. But this was the last lap!

Deliberately he leaned out over the edge of his car, toward the inside of the track, and got set to jam her down into the groove by the infield fence.

It was a poser for Russ Garvin. Sparrow seemed bent on disaster. To pass him Garvin must crawl around close outside that car—that infernal top-heavy roller that would again be lifting off its wheels any instant to hurtle up the bank into him. Garvin eased up and drove two lengths behind, close to the infield fence, alert for Sparrow's green heap to roll and open the way to the checkered flag.

Sparrow Earle, riding on the precarious edge of destruction, leaned far. He put what faith he had left in his star, on that lead ballast. The ballast and his agile, coaxing arms kept her bouncing along on her wheels—all four wheels. With all his hard-won skill he bent her around that corner. Any instant Garvin might change his mind. Sparrow drove.

When Sparrow slid out onto the home-stretch Garvin aired out. But not all the gun under Garvin's hood brought his screaming mount level. Sparrow Earle sailed past the black and white checkers of Ted Slater's flag. Finish! He lifted his foot—in a hurry. Sweat and scalding water drenched his face.

A HERO again to the roaring grandstand, Sparrow nursed his over-heating motor around the extra lap into the pits. Behind the leader crept Garvin, as was the custom. Sparrow hopped out with nonchalant briskness as he stopped on the grass not ten feet from Garvin's pile of wheels and supplies. Some of the pilots yelled approval but most of them looked him over for horseshoes and rabbits' feet. The ground felt good under his feet.

"That's a motor, that is!" Sparrow called to Bill Wheelock, laying a hand gingerly on the demolished radiator shell. "Some might say the job ~~was~~ a little tender, but with a motor like that a man can go places—first places."

"Yeh," said Bill Wheelock with no enthusiasm whatsoever. "Then you ain't figuring on selling it?"

Sparrow didn't answer him. Even a cocky little runt has moments when words elude him.

THAT night in their rented garage after supper, Bill Wheelock laid out his tools on the bench and settled down to the serious matter of lowering the center of gravity of that cranky heap. He could do that but he wasn't happy. He couldn't exorcise the demon that seemed to him to reside in that green chunk of iron.

Sparrow came strolling in, somewhat concealed by a few bandages. The hot water he had endured had raised blisters as well as his self-esteem.

"Mechanic, spare that crate," he said to Wheelock. "The automobile is sold."

Wheelock scowled sourly at him. "Nobody's even looked at it," he retorted. He glanced again and among the bandages on Sparrow's countenance he read truth. "What? I wouldn't've believed it of you! The poor guy! Do I know him?"

"I know him," Sparrow asserted. He rocked on his heels. "I know him better than he knows me. He was working through a front—but the man who's bought that heap is Russ Garvin."

Wheelock snorted. "For a second there I thought you'd sold it," he said morosely and lifted a wrench from the bench. Then, for a third time, he looked at Sparrow. His eyes popped. "What? Huh? Garvin's bought it?"

Sparrow nodded. "As is, and for what we paid for it."

"But—" Bill Wheelock massaged his skull savagely with the wrench. "What would he— Hey! What is this?"

"Of course he bought it," said Sparrow Earle. "He paid for it out of his Indianapolis prize money. Didn't he hear me say I was going to ride in that tumblebug from now on? And isn't he usually about two feet away on the same corner with me? Why wouldn't he save his life when he can afford to?"

He looked kindly at his stunned mechanic. "Answer me those and I'll ask you some more," he said. "I've got to go now. I think I'm being paged up at the hotel. Mr. T. T. Earle is wanted."



Submarine at

A GRAY winter's day, shot through by occasional sunlight, off the Iceland coast. It was not particularly cold, however, for the Gulf Stream warms this coast.

The submarine was running slowly along the surface. Most of her nondescript crew, who were united by only one feeling, one common hatred, were below. Two of them were sprawling on the after deck. Up forward were the three men who had actually stolen this craft out of Nazi hands.

"It's wonderful!" said Bishop, in an awed voice. "Everything complete; signals, code-books, no end of information and data the Allies would give anything to have! But I'd better see what I can pick up on that wireless."

As he ducked into the conning-tower hatch abruptly, Bert Carrick lit a ciga-

rette and eyed the man who had made this seizure possible—Ole Hanfell, as he now called himself. This fair, blue-eyed German had once been a submarine commander in the Reich Navy, before the Nazis threw him into a concentration-camp. Aye, though he had been a ranking Nazi himself, he was given the works because he had balked at Nazi brutality and torture.

"Funny business," said Carrick. "The three of us, I mean; black sheep, by conventional standards. You're a refugee from the Nazis with your head at stake. Bishop, a drunkard with a prison sentence behind him; England wants no more of him. Me, a failure in America—yes, and a jailbird too. Yet here we sit with a Nazi submarine, and a gang of reckless devils below who hate all Nazis! What are we going to do with our loot?"

Illustrated by
L. R. Gustavson



Large

By
H. BEDFORD-JONES

"I hadn't thought of that." Hanfell rubbed his bristly chin, his face anxious. "If we—"

Bishop came bursting from the hatch, running at them, excitement burgeoning in his eyes. He caught at them, drew them together, and spoke softly, urgently.

"Decision! I've news. We must decide immediately on our course. First, I'm in touch with a Nazi pocket battleship that was expecting to meet this sub and renew her supply of torpedoes, and to get fuel from that oil tanker we left. She's headin' straight for us, and about two hours away. But, dash it! What d'ye think?"

He almost sputtered in his agitation.

"A British squadron—two light cruisers and half a dozen destroyers! They're somewhere close, almost on top of us! Exchangin' signals. I picked 'em up. So

has the German. But the Nazis don't know the British code. I do. Shall I warn 'em? That pocket battleship can make hash of the lot. Speak up, speak up! What's our program?"

There was a moment of silence, of utter consternation. They had no program. Careless of life or death, men without hope and without a future, they had acted on mad impulse, on hatred of everything Nazi. And now destiny smote them and drove them into a larger horizon, with swift decisions to be made.

"**W**HAT are the British doing here? Looking for the *Eisenau*?" asked Ole Hanfell, frowning.

"No, no!" Bishop exclaimed. "They don't dream she's anywhere here. One of the two cruisers has a party of Admiralty officials aboard. They're makin'

a test cruise of some kind, new apparatus—so I gather from their talk."

"Look here!" Carrick spoke out abruptly. "We grabbed this sub, and what happened? Ole, you found your wife and daughter had escaped from Germany and are safe. Now you've something to live for. The gods help those who help themselves, by thunder! Bishop, what about you and me? I've nothing, and no hope of anything; but you might possibly regain what you've lost at home in England. Who knows? Why not make use of this submarine to some good purpose? She's no good to us, otherwise. We can't sell her or trade her. We'll be wiped out as pirates—"

"But we *can* trade her! Why not?" broke in Bishop. "She's not helpless, either. We have one torpedo left down below, in the tube and ready to fire."

"Listen," said Ole Hanfell. "I spent a year in a concentration-camp. Not to mention what my family suffered. Good! I'll make a bargain with you two. Give me that torpedo and I'll give you the submarine. Help me use that torpedo; after that, I agree with anything you want to do."

"You would anyhow." Carrick chuckled. "All right. It's a go."

"Done with you, old chap," added Bishop promptly. "How do you want to use this one remaining torpedo?"

"On that pocket battleship," replied the German curtly.

THE other two men exchanged a glance. Carrick shook his head.

"I'm against it. One torpedo won't sink a battleship."

"That is precisely why I propose using it." Ole Hanfell spoke patiently, calmly. "Sink her? No, but it will cripple her; this is certain. I will do it openly, as Karl von Ritsch of the Reich Navy, not as a wandering, fugitive victim of Nazi persecution. I will wireless her, the moment we speed the torpedo, who I am and why. That word will go on to Germany. It will hearten the thousands there, helpless to fight against the oppression of the mad dogs who rule them. The blow will satisfy my heart."

"Objection withdrawn," said Carrick, and clapped him on the shoulder. "Ole Hanfell's gone; Karl von Ritsch, welcome!"

"Agreed," said Bishop. "Now suppose we get down to brass tacks. The German ship is a good three hours away; I know her position. The squadron is somewhere

close by—might be within sight, if we weren't slap down on the water level. Shall we warn them? Let's decide on a program. No time to lose, y' know. Speak up, Karl von Ritsch!"

"You two decide," said the German. "Provided we strike that pocket battleship, I agree to anything else."

"All right, here's your program," spoke up Carrick incisively. "Our job is to play our own hand and save our own necks. The squadron's at war; let 'em take their chances, up to a certain extent. The *Eisenau* doesn't know where they are, exactly, and can't savvy the British wireless code. Correct?"

"Absolutely, old fellow," Bishop said cheerfully.

"We have three hours. If we can make contact, contact your squadron immediately, that's time and to spare. You have the British Naval Code in your head?"

"Of course. I was in the wireless until invalidated out."

"Then contact 'em immediately. Ask if the Admiralty big shots would be interested in having a brand-new German sub turned over to 'em."

BISHOP went to the open hatch and disappeared down the ladder. Karl von Ritsch, as he now was, turned to Carrick with his long, searching look, and accepted a cigarette.

"You'll turn her over to the British?"

"If we can make a deal. Depends on what turns up. May have to convince 'em we mean business, by sinking that German ship, or crippling her. We'll do that, in any case. Will the blow satisfy you? What else do you want out of it?"

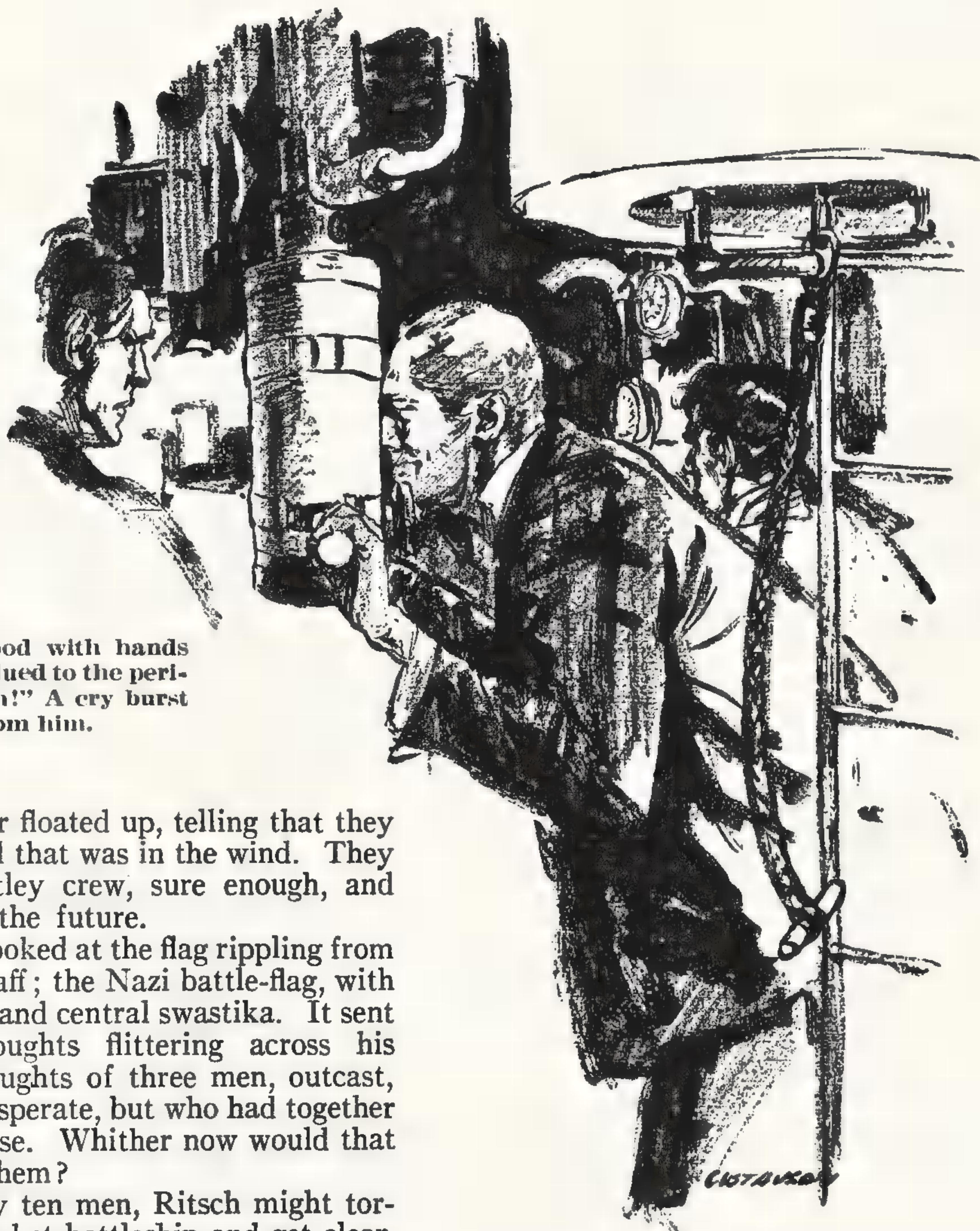
"Nothing except to reach Norway and find my wife," Ritsch asserted. "After that, I don't care what happens."

"And you used to be a Junker, one of the top Nazis!" mused Carrick aloud. "Confound it, we should be able to do things! Maybe we'll go to Norway with you."

Ritsch grimaced, in his excuse for a laugh, and turned away.

"Fine," he said. "Now I must get the men together and instruct them. We must submerge when we fire the torpedo, of course." He glanced up at the flag flying from the bridge staff, and a convulsion of hatred passed across his hard, lined features. "You stay here. Take down that accursed swastika flag!"

He shouted at the men on the after-deck. They came on the run, and disappeared with him below. Presently a



Ritsch stood with hands and eyes glued to the periscope. "Ah!" A cry burst from him.

ragged cheer floated up, telling that they approved all that was in the wind. They were a motley crew, sure enough, and reckless of the future.

Carrick looked at the flag rippling from the short staff; the Nazi battle-flag, with its red field and central swastika. It sent strange thoughts fluttering across his brain. Thoughts of three men, outcast, hopeless, desperate, but who had together found a cause. Whither now would that cause lead them?

With only ten men, Ritsch might torpedo the pocket battleship and get clear. Queer how Ritsch had learned from the two captive officers below-decks, that his wife and child were safe in Norway, escaped from Nazi mistreatment! What future did that open for Ritsch?

A future might still open for Bishop too, thought Carrick. Were this sub turned over to England, Bishop might regain some of his old standing; but he was not the man to do any bartering. Drink had put him down and out; would it do so again? And was the effort worth while?

"I say!" Bishop's head showed above the hatchway. "We're in touch. One of those two cruisers is the *Crécy*, with the Admiralty party aboard. My message must have knocked 'em silly. Got a cigarette to spare?"

He came up, lit a cigarette, grinning.

"Odd thing, Carrick. My father's of the Admiralty; he's aboard that cruiser."

"Captain of her?"

"No, no. I never told you; he has a title. Lord Faucondale. You see how far I've come."

"Did you wear a title too?"

"No. I'm the second son. My brother has a cruiser."

"Submarines beat cruisers this trip. Now see here; if we're to do any trading, leave it in my hands. Your people won't deal with Ritsch. Nazi or not, he's a German. If they deal with an American, they'll be a bit flustered and uncertain."

"Right you are."

"What do you want to get out of it?" Carrick surveyed him sharply. "Ritsch has no further ambitions, for the present. The men want only to get a crack at the Nazis. But you?"

"I?" Bishop scowled. "There's nothing I can win back; I'll not ask my family

for a damned thing. I'll never take another drink, if that's on your mind; but rehabilitation? It's impossible. Make your own trade, and I'm satisfied."

Carrick thought fast. This man was worth while, well worth saving! A man of high qualities, fine brain, deep ability. Was this just a chance harum-scarum adventure, to end in an exciting story told over a tavern table? Or was it all something greater, something destined by the unseen forces of life, something upon which broken men could find themselves again and mount to new heights?

"Look!" Carrick caught Bishop's arm, his eyes alight. "Leave this to me. By heaven, I'll paralyze those Britishers! Ole has agreed to leave the game to me. You do likewise."

"It's yours to play—win, lose or draw," said Bishop. "Captain Carrick of the *U 36*! Are you going to take that flag down?"

Carrick turned to the staff. The Nazi flag came fluttering down.

"I'll replace it with something else," he said. "Faucondale, eh? Sounds Scotch."

Bishop chuckled. "Scotch began me, and Scotch ended me. Well, what orders?"

"Skip down and wireless your old man. Tell him this is the *Flying Dutchman*, formerly the *U 36*, Captain Carrick now in command. My compliments to Lord Faucondale, and if he wants this submarine as a free gift, he can meet us, come aboard, and talk it over."

"They'll take no chances with subs, y' know," Bishop said doubtfully.

"Add that you're second in command. It'll curl your old man's whiskers a bit."

BISHOP, laughing, went below. He was no sooner off the ladder than Ritsch came up, bringing his instruments. It was almost noon; he was going to take an observation. He set them down, lit a cigarette, and nodded at Carrick.

"All clear. The men will agree in anything we do. Two of them have served in submarines and understand the valves. Fingal has the engines in hand; that old Scot knows his business. We can submerge at a moment's notice. I'll send up one of the men to be here. When the diving-bell rings, you must hop down and close the hatch and hammer the catch home. Come, let me show you."

At the barrel-like hatchway, Ritsch explained the mechanism of the hatch-cover, which was simple. Carrick asked after the two Nazi officers.

"Tied up in their own quarters."

"If we connect with the British, better bring 'em up and get rid of 'em. And look out for tricks. They'd sink the sub and all of us, rather than see her handed over."

"I'll watch them," said Ritsch grimly.

CARRICK dropped down the ladder. Bishop, seated at the wireless desk at one side, nodded, went on with his work, then swung around.

"They thought it was a hoax at first; now they know better. The *Crécy* and two destroyers are standing for us; may come along at any moment. Better have Ritsch—"

A hail came down the hatchway from Ritsch.

"Smoke! Southwest by a quarter west! Two smokes showing!"

"All right," called up Carrick, and looked at Bishop. "Take a message to what's-his-name—the noble lord."

"Hold on," broke in Bishop uneasily. "We're a bit on the ticklish side, y'know. They say if this thing's true, we're rank pirates."

"Right. From Cap'n Albert Carrick, pirate, commander of the anti-Nazi Navy and American citizen. My respects to Lord F. and I'm steaming south on the surface to meet him openly. I'm ready to turn over this submarine to his authority on certain conditions, together with the Nazi code-books, records and everything else aboard. I want an assurance that Lord F. will come aboard and discuss terms with us. Send it!"

Bishop went to work on the wireless desk. Carrick lit a cigarette and waited, till a chuckle came from the other man.

"We have the pater listenin' in—Hello! He asks what if he refuses this insolent request?"

"In that case, he can go to hell and fish for his own submarine."

Bishop exploded in a gale of laughter. "I can just see the scene on that cruiser's bridge! My eye! The old boy will be purple in the face—wait, now! They're talkin' again."

The reply came through. Lord Faucondale would promise nothing, but agreed to come aboard the submarine and discuss the matter. Mention of Bishop's name had obviously assured him against any trick.

Carrick rose. "Good! Tell him this. We're within sight of him. If his destroyers approach within a mile of us, we'll at once submerge, and the Admiral-

ty will have no further chance to learn all the secrets of the Nazi subs. When he comes aboard, he must bring no more than three other officers with him."

Passing into the engine-room, where old Fingal was perched on the catwalk between the Diesels, Carrick sent a hail for all hands except Fingal on deck. When he had spoken briefly with the Scot engineer, he followed, and standing beside Ritsch on the little bridge, eyed the men below.

"Comrades, I want all of you on the for'ard deck when the British come aboard," he said. Three smokes were now breaking over the horizon. "I'm going to strike a deal with them, but I may have to run a bluff; if so, you back me up and no questions. Agreed?"

There was a quick, hearty murmur of assent.

"Kraken!"

The Norwegian steward stepped out and saluted smartly.

"Get up some chairs or stools, six in all, on the after deck. Cap'n Ritsch and I will receive the visitors there. Then find some sort of liquor and serve it. Everyone else, make yourselves comfortable."

A hail came up from Bishop, jubilantly. Lord Faucondale accepted the conditions.

Carrick gave Karl von Ritsch a glance. "We've got the Britishers worried!"

"Me too. I know them. They're hard to deal with."

"So's a Yankee," said Carrick cheerfully. "What do you want me to ask for, on your own behalf?"

"I want to go to Norway."

"Okay. Maybe the three of us should stick together," Carrick rejoined slowly. "Three black sheep—we've got luck with us, perhaps. We could do things. You know all the inside Nazi stuff. Bishop has a lot on the ball too—swears he's off liquor for life. As for me, nothing much matters, but I need friends. I'll stick, if you want me."

RITSCH turned a gravely intent look upon him, but those cold blue eyes were alight with warm feeling.

"That was the finest thing ever said to me, Carrick. But I don't think you'll get anything out of these English. They're hard, bitter hard."

"On the outside, yes, like Americans; protective coloration. Remember, Ole, we've got a big edge on 'em. We've got what they want. And they don't know a thing about us. This Lord Somebody

who's coming aboard—he's Bishop's father. Kicked him out long ago. Hello! Big cruiser, that."

She was coming up fast and bulking above their limited horizon. Ritsch, who had brought up binoculars, focused them.

"She's the one. Two destroyers, also," he said.

Just then Bishop showed up.

"Well, my hearties! No flag flying? Where are your colors, Carrick?"

"Forgot about it." Carrick jumped for the ladder. "I'll go down and find something we can use."

HE went below. Bishop joined Ritsch, and squinted against the sunlight at the approaching vessels.

"Dashed if I won't be sorry to see you goin' off to Norway," said he.

"I'll be sorry to leave you," Ritsch rejoined. "Carrick thinks we might stick together. I do not know."

"I say, that's an idea!" Bishop's eyes lit up. "Three of us against Adolf, what? Three black sheep against the wolf! Right you are!"

"You would like that?"

Bishop leaned over and gripped the powerful hand of Ritsch. Carrick, just emerging from the hatchway, saw the gesture and spoke.

"Looks as if we're agreed! Ole, what's in it for you if we go on fighting?"

"For me? Nothing," the German said heavily. "Nothing but the satisfaction of giving all I have to give in the cause of decent people and the old ideals of civilization. Always there are mad dogs in the world, the destroying hordes who are too brutal to know or feel the things of the soul, the fine things of life. Call them Goths, Vandals, Mongols, Huns, Communists, Dictators, Nazis—they're all the same; and always the world rising around them smother them and goes its way. I shall help smother them."

"Well said!" exclaimed Bishop.

"That goes for me, I guess." Carrick was busy bending on the new flag to the halyards. Now he ran it up—a pennant, orange and black, standing out in the breeze. The others stared at it.

"What the devil's that thing?" demanded Bishop. "What does the *P* stand for?"

"One of our captive officers had it pinned on the cabin wall," said Carrick. "I think he must have attended Princeton. Let the Britishers worry about what it stands for—we'll say *Piracy* and let it go at that. Are they coming?"



"Get into your pinnace before you have to jump for it!" snapped Carrick. "Fingal! Get Bishop here!"

Ritsch grunted and trained his binoculars on the cruiser. To right and left, smoke plumes hung heavy as two destroyers crept cautiously along, each one a mile distant. The cruiser herself was now in full sight. It was a fine cold winter's day, with no wind and no sea to mention. Bishop now went below to sit

on the wireless, and took an order to stop the engines. Fingal presently emerged on the bridge, wiping his hands on a bit of waste and staring at the cruiser.

"She's putting out a steam pinnace," announced Ritsch. "All her small guns are trained on us. She's coming no closer—afraid to take chances. Absurd!

If we wanted to torpedo her, we'd have done it long ago. These fish of ours have a range of thirty thousand yards. Ah! Officers!"

"You and I will receive them on the after deck," said Carrick. "Kraken's getting some stools up. Mr. Fingal, remain on the bridge to pass any instructions to Mr. Bishop, or to the crew for'ard."

TWENTY minutes later, the steam pinnace crept in under the counter of the *U 36*.

Carrick welcomed the party of officers, eying them swiftly as he spoke. Two in uniform; a young man in mufti; an elderly, eagle-faced man also in mufti, who by his harsh eyes and features would be Faucondale.

"Welcome, gentlemen; I'm Captain Carrick. . . . Lord Faucondale, I think? Come aboard, sir, come aboard. I didn't know you Admiralty lords risked your necks at sea. Congratulations."

The elderly man glared up at Carrick, a bitter, uncompromising glare.

"If that graceless son of mine's here, I wish to speak with him."

"Apparently you're misinformed; you can't disown a son and still claim him, can you?" Carrick responded coolly. "If you refer to Mr. Bishop, he's below, standing by the intake valves, ready to open them and sink the ship in case you gentlemen try any trickery. That's why our crew is assembled forward, also. May I again suggest that you come aboard?"

It was a curious scene, as the four Britons stood on the after deck, staring. Faucondale, with a cold hauteur indicating his repressed passion, introduced Lord Sithbridge, the younger man in civvies; and Captains York and Carewe, the two officers. They shook hands cordially, then stiffened as Carrick introduced Ritsch.

"Thanks to Captain von Ritsch, we have this vessel. As you know, not all Germans are Nazis. Captain von Ritsch has spent a year or so in a concentration-camp. Sit down, gentlemen, sit down!"

"This rather singular flag of yours!" Lord Sithbridge cocked an eye at the pennant. "May I inquire what it signifies?"

"Sorry," said Carrick amiably. "That's a secret known only in the United States, I fear."

All eyes went to him. "Then," barked Faucondale, "you're a United States officer?"

Carrick laughed. "Far from it, My Lord, far from it! Come, I'll briefly

sketch why we're here and what we want. Ah! What have you there, Kraken?"

Kraken approached with a heavily loaded tray.

"The best Moët & Chandon, sir," he rejoined. "And Mr. Bishop asked me to tell you that the code-books and all other documents are weighted and ready to be sunk."

Carrick nodded, and affected not to see the exchange of glances among the visitors.

No one refused the proffered champagne, but the four Britons were tense. What had seemed a hoax, or some incredible fairy-tale, was turning out hard reality. They were appraising Carrick, the men forward, the submarine, with sharp eyes.

Carrick lifted his glass.

"Confusion to the Nazis!" he exclaimed. "And Captain von Ritsch, better get those two Nazi officers into the pinnace. We don't want 'em to drown if we have to sink the sub."

"What's this absurd talk of sinking her?" snapped Faucondale, as Ritsch hurried off. Carrick turned to him, a sudden bite in the gray eyes and incisive features.

"Judge for yourself, My Lord. Here's how we took her." In few words, he told of the taking, of how the submarine had brought them here, and of the three in command. "None of us can do army service. I'm an American and legally neutral, while our crew are a mixed lot—all dead against the Nazis, however. Now we're ready to hand over this sub to you, on certain conditions."

Faucondale grunted. "You want to escape punishment, eh?"

Carrick looked him in the eyes for a moment.

"My Lord, let me suggest that you save your jokes for a more appropriate occasion," he said quietly. "I know perfectly well what this submarine is worth to England. I'm making demands, not asking what you'll give."

The Britons exchanged glances.

"So you're after money?" demanded one of the officers.

"Certainly. Whatever amount of prize-money the Admiralty may deem just, to be divided among the men of the crew. Captain von Ritsch desires transportation to Norway, where his family are now safe from Nazi persecution. His wife, I understand, has also been in a concentration-camp. Mr. Bishop and I also want transportation to Norway."

The four stared at him. A momentary diversion occurred; the two Nazi officers, still bound, were being brought up and handed over into the pinnace. Sight of them lent credence to Carrick's words.

"Norway! Why Norway?" demanded Lord Sithbridge with open interest.

"Pardon me; that's our affair, My Lord," said Carrick. "I shall have to have a passport of some kind, English or not; you can arrange it. Also, Mr. Bishop must have complete rehabilitation in his former standing." Carrick met the savage glare of Faucondale and went on, with a slight smile. "Also, he must have the honor of a knighthood. You people turn any wealthy brewer into a peer, so you might as well give a knighthood to a deserving chap. And I think Bishop's damned well earned it."

LORD FAUCONDALE seemed about to choke. The two officers watched Carrick with amused and interested gaze. Lord Sithbridge lit a cigarette with a slightly bored air.

"Y' know, you're dashed lucky," he observed. "Any other ship would have blown you out of the water. We happen to be conducting some trials of new equipment—that's why we're at sea. Dashed unusual and all that, but very lucky. No trouble about the knighthood. Winston can handle that. Go on. What else do you want?"

"My passport," said Carrick. "That's important."

"Well? Go on."

"I think that's all."

"The man's mad, utterly mad!" burst out Lord Faucondale savagely. "Mr. What's-your-name, this whole thing is preposterous. If I were you, I'd end this nonsense, hand over this submarine, and trust to the judgment of the Admiralty as to rewards."

"You would?" queried Carrick, large-eyed.

"Yes, sir! If I were you, I'd do this and prove myself a sensible man."

Carrick smiled and leaned back negligently.

"Haven't you people got a battleship called the *Iron Duke*? Your name for Wellington? Ever hear the story about Wellington during one of his Peninsula campaigns? Let me remind you of it. He had just given an order to attack, when one of his staff rode up hurriedly to him. 'If I were you, sir, I'd not do that!' he exclaimed. Wellington gave him a cold, hard look, and jerked a nod at him.

'Right,' said he. 'You wouldn't.' Three words, gentlemen. I trust you catch the allusion, My Lord."

There was a burst of laughter, but Faucondale did not laugh. He gave Carrick his savage glare, then his lips twitched.

"You mistake," he said grimly. "The Duke's words were: 'Right! By God, you wouldn't.' Great mistake to get your quotations wrong, sir."

Carrick smiled. "Well? Do you gentlemen say yes or no?"

"Really," said Captain York, "we can't give you a reply on the spot, y' know. Isn't done. These things must be discussed and so forth, taken up with the gov'ment—"

"Oh, very well." Carrick looked up at the bridge. "Mr. Fingal! Pass the word to Mr. Bishop to be ready with the valves. I think there's room in the pinnace for all the men."

"One moment," put in Lord Sithbridge. "Really, sir, you demand rather odd things. For example, this transportation to Norway. That's very difficult to arrange—"

"Bosh!" said Carrick rudely. "We go by air. Provide passage by air. Don't be a piker. We can take the damned sub to Norway ourselves, and may do it if you get cranky. You can give me a reply on the spot, or see this sub go down. No wonder you Britishers have run this war like a bunch of old women! Here we sink a Nazi battleship and take a sub and offer it to you on a silver platter, and you hem and haw about it! Your government would give a million dollars to get their hands on this ship, and you know it! And in just about two minutes, my demands go up. I might as well ask a few hundred thousand pounds, I suppose."

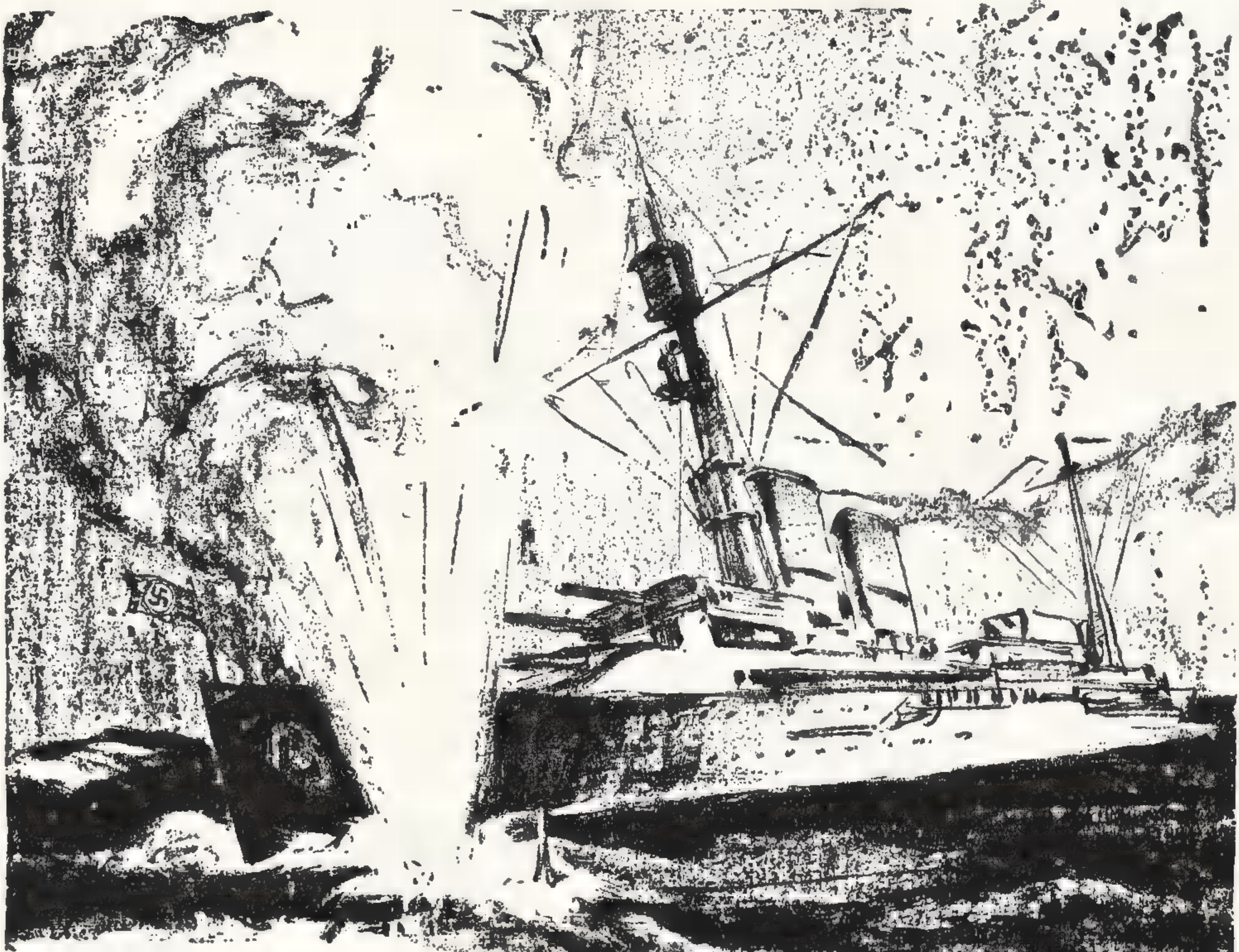
"Just what are you getting out of this?" queried Captain Carewe skeptically.

"A passport and transportation to Norway. Are you deaf in that ear?" Carrick's lip curled scornfully. "A knighthood for one man who deserves it—and you haggle! Thank God I'm a Yankee and not a Britisher!"

Faucondale came to his feet.

"Fantastic nonsense," he said abruptly. "I refuse absolutely to listen further."

"Very well." Carrick swung around, a swirl of furious passion pulsing through him. "Mr. Fingal! Pass down the word to open valves. You men for'ard! Lay aft. Get aboard the pinnace or swim for it. Hurry up, My Lord! Get aboard, damn you! We're done for."



The torpedo had struck. There was the battleship, amid a mounting cloud of steam and smoke.

Fingal bawled the orders. The men began to rush aft.

"Good God! He means it!" cried out Lord Sithbridge. "Here, Carrick—look here! Show reason—"

"I'm sick of your brand of reason," snapped Carrick. "Get into your pinnace before you have to jump for it! Fingal! Get Bishop up here!"

Captain Carewe came up to Carrick and caught his arm. "Stop it, you fool!" he said quickly. "Listen! Listen!"

Everything stopped. The men halted. Some of them were exclaiming. The seamen in the pinnace alongside were growling oaths and alarmed questions. Upon the air was a vibrant shudder—not a sound, but a palpitation, a shaking of the air. It came again and yet again.

"Guns! Salvos of gunfire, heavy guns!" exclaimed Carewe. "What's up?"

A YELL lifted from Bishop, below. Next instant his head was through the hatchway.

"Carrick! Listen—I got a message from the other cruiser! The *Eisenau* has got her, has crippled her! The *Eisenau* is heading this way now—not twenty miles away! I've got her course! Here's our



chance—and the *Eisenau* has been calling us, too!"

At the same moment, a gun spoke out from the *Crécy*, then another, in urgent recall.

Carrick swung to the German.

"Ole! Take charge—get the men below. She's your ship now." He turned on the four visitors, who stood as though stupefied. "Get into your pinnace, gentlemen, and aboard your own ship. We're going after that Nazi battleship, and a submarine is no place for old ladies from the Admiralty. Might get hurt."

Under his scornful eye and biting words, anger leaped to the faces of the four Britons.

"You say—the *Eisenau*?" broke out Carewe. "Why, damme, she can outrange

us in guns and speed! She can destroy us before we can fire a shot—"

"Get moving," snapped Carrick. "Never mind groaning. We're going after her."

"Egad! I believe you speak the truth!" exclaimed Faucondale. He came close to Carrick, glaring. "You damned impertinent American bounder, I'm taking no orders from you! I stay aboard here, for one."

"And I!" added Lord Sithbridge. "What ho, Carewe! Might use you down below, old chap, and these lads in the pinnace! What say, York?"

"By gad, yes!" cried Carewe. "What d'ye say, Carrick? Can you use us?"

"You're damned right," said Carrick. His tone was incredulous, overjoyed.

Thirty seconds later the pinnace was floating deserted, and the *U 36* was picking up speed, with British tars crowding down the hatchway, and Captain von Ritsch staring at his new assistants in blank amazement.

Carewe saluted him, smilingly.

"Let's have your orders, Captain; we're old hands at the submarine game, y' know."

Ritsch, with a jerk, got himself in hand. Calmly now, unhurried, he assigned the others their posts and sent them below. Carrick joined him on the bridge. They heard Captain Carewe, down below, dictating to Bishop a message for the *Crécy*.

"So you couldn't deal with the English, after all," said Ritsch. "Yet they're damned good sports, eh?"

Carrick shrugged. "We'll give 'em a show, anyhow. What'll you do?"

"Stay on the surface," said Ritsch. "Half submerge when we sight her—stay up here so she'll suspect nothing—then give her the fish, tell her who I am, and submerge. Suit you?"

"Don't ask foolish questions. You're the boss now."

Ritsch grimaced. "All right. I mean to make sure of her—only one torpedo." He leaned over the hatchway. "Bishop! Get the *Eisenau*. Give her our code number. Say we're making for her and have sighted another English cruiser. That should bring her right along where we want her."

"Aye!" responded Bishop's voice.

THE *Crécy* and the two destroyers fell away. They were standing off, awaiting the result of the submarine's work; Carewe must have given them this order. As Ritsch pointed out, they could really

do nothing else. To rush to the assistance of their sister ship would be suicidal. The pocket battleship had the heels of nearly everything on the seas, while only a battleship could meet her heavy guns.

"One of the destroyers is coming down to pick up the pinnace and the two Nazi officers, looks like," said Carrick. "Hello! We're going full speed, from the feel."

"Yes. We should meet her in twenty minutes," Ritsch said gravely. "No hurry."

Bishop showed up, unexpectedly, grinning all over.

"The *Eisenau* acknowledged," said he. "Thanks to that Nazi code-book, I'm doing all right."

"Leave her alone, and don't answer messages, until we're ready to submerge," said Ritsch. "Have you seen Lord Faucondale?"

"Nary a glimmer," said Bishop. "I suppose the old chap went barging into the engine-room. That's how he made his pile, y' know—marine engines and so forth. Hello! What's that smoke to the eastward?"

"The *Eisenau*," said Ritsch, focusing his glasses. "Too bad we have only an eight-mile horizon. She'll probably wait to speak with us before going after the *Crécy*. The closer the better. I cannot waste that one torpedo."

"Our guest crew would be damned nervous," said Bishop, chuckling, "if they were aware of all the circumstances."

"I'm nervous as hell, so make the most of it," Carrick rejoined.

Ritsch was writing rapidly, and handed the scrawl to Bishop.

"Can you read it? Then get ready. Send it—no code at all, mind—when I give the word. Direct to the *Eisenau*. I think it will get picked up in Germany."

As Bishop disappeared, Ritsch smoked, calmly, but eyes intent, as the smoke on the horizon became a dot, and the dot became a ship. The English craft had disappeared in the haze behind. Then, abruptly, he tossed his cigarette away and went to the ladder. There he paused.

"I'll send up one of the men," he said. "I'll fire the compressed-air charge myself. Wait for the signal, so she won't get scared. Then act quickly."

He was gone. One of the Danes from their original crowd, a man named Swend, came up to join Carrick. He was bubbling over with eagerness.

"Damned good thing them English joined in," he exclaimed. "I dunno if we'd have been able to handle her our-

selves. They've took hold fine—oh, is that the baby?"

He stared at the growing ship. Carrick touched his arm and pointed to the forward deck. It was beginning to dip. Water swished across it, the deck was awash; then the diving vanes steadied. She was ready to dive.

Carrick looked out at the pocket battleship. She was looming larger, rushing down from the horizon at top speed.

"Doin' all o' thirty, I bet!" cried Swend.

Three miles—now two, Carrick estimated. Before he knew it, down to a bare mile. The high wings of water fell away from her bow; she had slowed or stopped her engines. The sub forged on, heading for her. Her way fell off, and she began to swing around.

"Watch!" said Swend, his voice tense.

CARRICK was watching, every nerve in agony of suspense. He felt the submarine jump a little, saw the sudden white streak leaping from her bow. Then he heard the diving-alarm clanging, and jumped for the hatchway. Swend was in ahead of him. He crowded after, reached for the chain of the hatch-cover, and it banged down. They made it fast, then hammered home the catch, and Carrick dropped on down into the control-room.

Ritsch stood beside the ladder, hands and eyes glued to the periscope. Bishop was at the wireless desk. Carewe and two of his English seamen were at the controls. Carewe was calling out:

"Open! All tank-valves open! Valves shut! All ventilation-valves shut—"

"Ah!" A wild cry burst from Ritsch, who left the periscope and rushed to the controls.

Carrick took his place at the periscope. As he did so, the sub suddenly lurched to a stiff shock. He peered into the tube.

The torpedo had struck. There was the battleship, half visible amid a mounting cloud of steam and smoke. Then she vanished abruptly—everything vanished, as the periscope submerged.

"Got her!" shouted Ritsch, his calm gone. "Got her! I'm diving to thirty feet. When we come up, Bishop, be ready to send a message at once. Have the *Crécy* come and finish her!"

Down and down. Carrick, beside the wireless desk, kept himself out of the way. Ritsch was cool now; everyone was cool. All sense of motion was gone. Nothing happened. From the engine-room came voices in high dispute—Lord

Faucondale and old Fingal were shrilling some kind of engine argument.

How long this lasted, Carrick never knew. He stirred at length, to an incline of the deck. She was coming up. Ritsch made his way to the periscope, peering into it, swinging it around by the handles.

"Everything clear. Horizon empty," he said. Carewe sang out a report from the controls. At a signal to the engines, the Diesels fell to work. Ritsch turned to Bishop and Carrick, and spoke with a certain weariness.

"Gentlemen, I keep my bargain."

"Gentlemen, hell!" spat out Carrick. "Aren't we pals, Ole?"

The German looked blankly at him, then warmed and kindled.

"Of course, of course! The ship is now yours."

"Cap'n Carrick in command again," said Bishop.

"Are we on the surface?" Carrick demanded of Ritsch, who nodded.

"Yes. At half speed. Horizon clear."

"Good. Then let's get out into the open air. Captain Carewe, if you want to send any messages, now's your chance. Come up when you're ready, Bishop."

He went up, released the hatch-cover, and crawled out on the streaming deck. To make room for those following, he went on to the after-deck and stood there, staring at the empty horizon. It was difficult to realize what had happened. A Nazi ship struck down or crippled, and this weapon in his hands, this weapon of destiny and fortune!

Ritsch joined him, silently. Others came; he ignored them. He stared at the waves curling up around the knifelike stern, and there was a change upon him. The bitterness so long ground into those hawklike features had vanished. Carrick was a new man, living a new life. He was not sure of what the future held, but at least there was a future. He was no longer an outcast. He had accomplished something, he and these others. When he turned, at last, he was a man looking faraway with a wide gaze of authority.

Here were Lord Faucondale and Lord Sithbridge together, watching him. Here were Ritsch and York and Carewe, smoking together.

"Well?" demanded Carrick. "We're back to where we started. Does the Admiralty want this submarine or not?"

"You're preposterous, sir," spoke out Faucondale.

"Thank you," said Carrick, an angry glint in his eye.

SUBMARINE AT LARGE

"Dash it all, man," exclaimed Lord Sithbridge, "don't you see we've capitulated? You get what you asked, of course. Here, have a cigarette and forget it."

Carrick met him with a smile and accepted the smoke. At this moment Bishop appeared on the bridge.

"Word from the *Crécy*," he announced blithely. "All well. She's running down to pick up what's left of the Nazi crew. Ah, Sithbridge! Haven't seen you in ages! My word, old chap, you're looking fit! Who's that elderly chap with the cold eye? Looks like an Admiralty—"

"Come down here!" barked Lord Faucondale; but Bishop shook his head.

"No, thanks. Look here, Carrick, have you come to terms yet?"

"You blackguard! You know very well his terms were absurd!" exclaimed Faucondale.

"Haven't bothered my head about it," said Bishop, beaming down at them. "Left it in Carrick's hands. I hope we get the Norway thing out of it."

There was a momentary silence.

"Do you mean to say," demanded Faucondale, glaring, "that you don't know what this American demanded on your behalf?"

"Me? On my behalf?" Bishop's astonishment was obvious. "Look here, Carrick, what are you up to? You know jolly well we agreed to go to Norway with Ritsch!"

"Well—God bless my soul!" said Lord Faucondale slowly. His eyes opened wide; he squared his shoulders. "John, my boy, come down here."

"Hello!" Astonishment leaped into Bishop's face. "Why, Pater, if it isn't you! And to think I never knew you were here—"

With a laugh, he vaulted the bridge rail and landed on the deck below. Next moment he was gripping his father's hand.

"I say! Didn't he know—about the knighthood?" Sithbridge asked.

"No," Carrick said. "Does he get it?" Lord Sithbridge smiled.

"By wireless—if possible!" said he. "But my dear feller, you should have asked something for yourself, y' know, something really worth while. Deuced careless of you to omit it, really."

"I didn't omit it," Carrick said softly. His gaze was fastened upon the two figures, father and son. "I asked the biggest thing you or anyone else could give me—and I got it."

Another story of the Three Black Sheep will appear in an early issue.



The able author of "North to the Promised Land" here gives us the dramatic story of an Arizona murder mystery.

Illustrated by
Lyle Justis

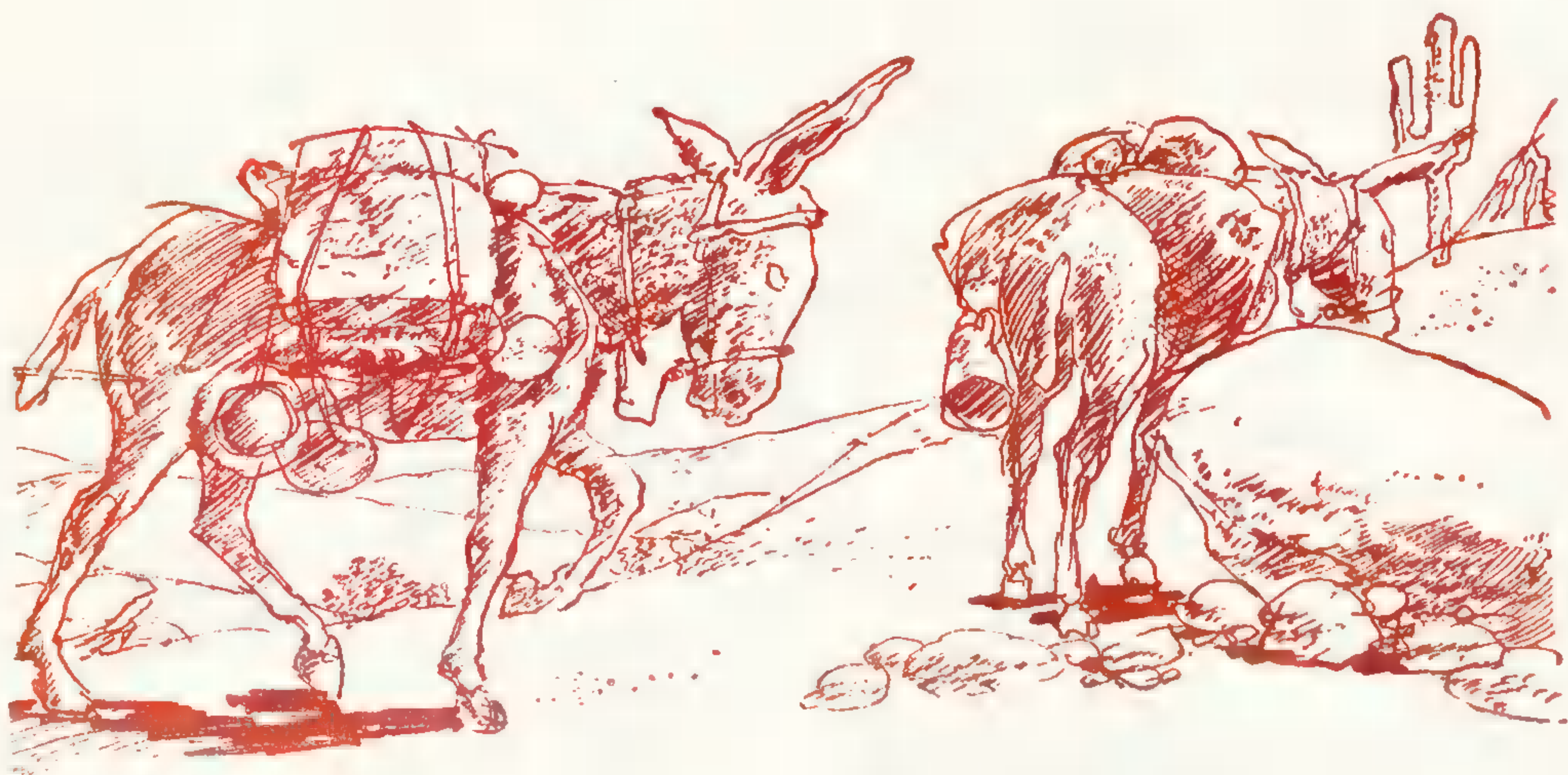
A SHORT dusty figure, herding two burros, shuffled across the purple shadows of the Dragoons. Old Dad Warren and the lean, hunched-up range—one would not have been complete without the other. He plodded along in his own dust-cloud, a contented wanderer on the desert's face—white-haired, brown as a boot, his twinkling amber eyes serene.

Dad was in no hurry. He might make Headstone this evening, or tomorrow, or not until Cora-Lee Harris had her next birthday. Only that, and the need of grub, ever drew him into town. If life was solitary, he preferred it so. But in his own way, Dad was on a quest.

It was his nature to crack open rubble that most desert men would shun, and sometimes in these rocks he found promising color. Friendships came likewise. Only the cruder lumps of humanity interested him.

"Sort of like pickin' up float," he would say. "Lots of good stuff gets broke off from the mother lode and rolls around till you'd never know it, just lookin' at the outside."

The shadows of the Dragoons deepened. Dad halted, thinking that perhaps he had better find a camp for the night. At rest, his thin frame sagged slightly to



Passing Through

By HAROLD CHANNING WIRE

the left from the weight of a huge forty-five in his belt. The gun was no longer a necessity, but Dad cherished it out of companionable feeling. To save load he wore it empty.

He knew of a water-hole farther on, and was continuing in its direction when his alert eye picked up something unusual: Two pairs of tracks led up the coulee—no sign of animals with them.

"Now just why," Dad wondered, "would a couple of men be hoofin' it across this desert without their grub and water?"

He turned upward along the footprints. On passing a bend in the cut, he halted abruptly. "Now then," he said aloud, "we've done found somethin'."

Ahead of him lay the body of a man. Dad approached, making certain that the one set of tracks leading away from the body were several hours old.

"H'm," he observed, "snake-bit!" And after more careful scrutiny, "Over-bit, you might say. Two places." His knowing amber eyes went from one swollen arm to the other. "And rattlers," he finished, "aint often double-barreled!"

He rose, surveyed the sand. "Didn't leave his tracks, neither, squirmin' away—that snake didn't."

Walking off a few steps from the body, Dad poked about a brush clump, an-

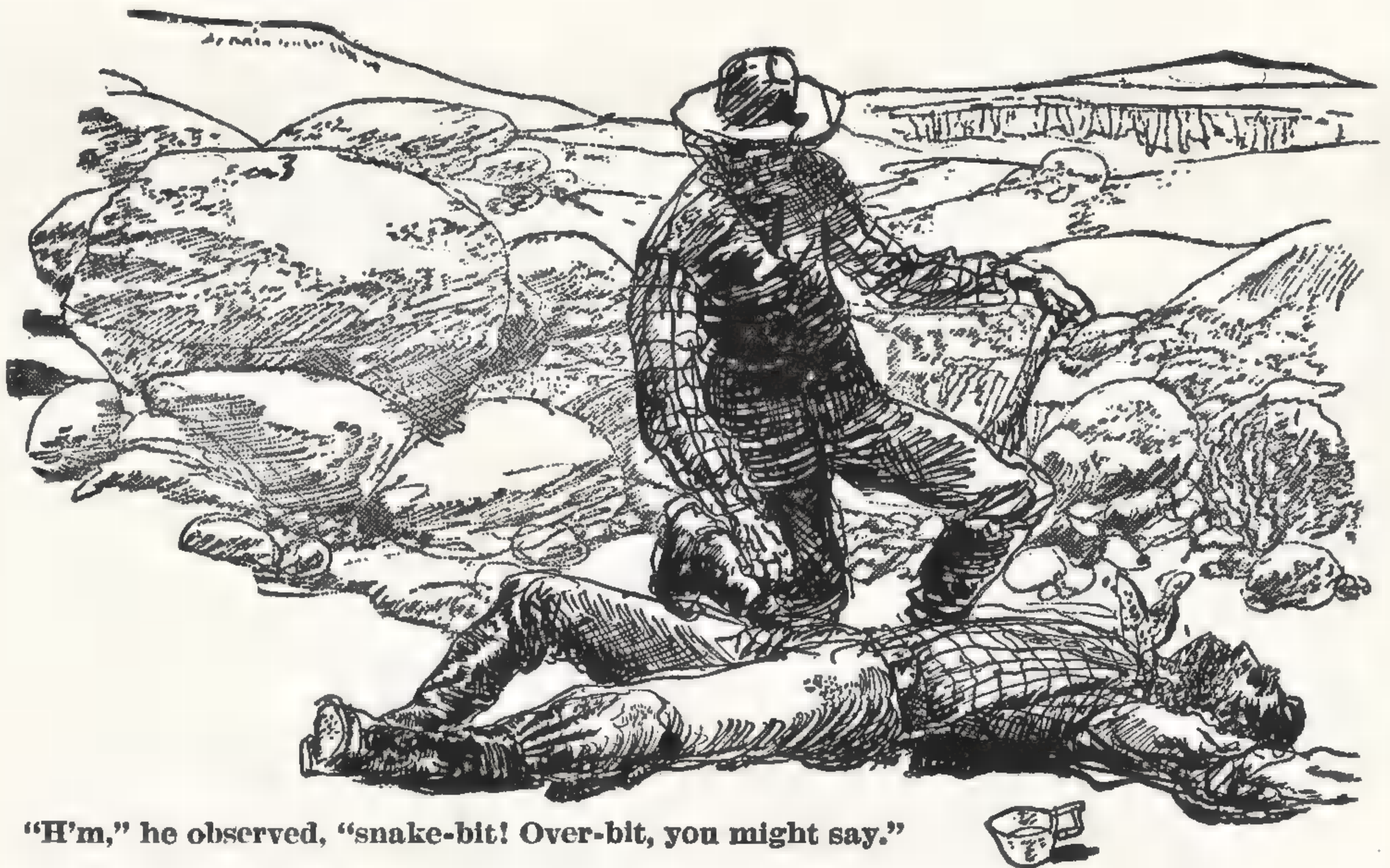
nouncing after a moment: "Here you be! Considerable of a broad-jumper, this fellow." He lifted a dead rattler on his boot-toe, considered it, put it back in the brush.

The scene that had occurred here was plain to him. The man now lying dead had been struck down. The snake had been killed, its jaws propped open and its fangs made to enter the man's arms. In a few more hours, death would have seemed from accidental snake-bite.

"Well," Dad concluded, "things do happen!" And with that, his curiosity was satisfied. In his years he had seen more than one mystery such as this, written only in footsteps which would vanish forever under the next wind-blown sand. He'd perhaps tell Sheriff White about it when he reached Headstone.

He went back to the body. Lying near it was a flat-crowned black hat; on the other side was a long black coat. They had cost real money. Both were in good shape. Never a wasteful soul, Dad rolled the hat and coat together. Returning to his burros, he stuffed the clothes into a pack-bag and shuffled on.

THAT night as he camped near the water-hole his thoughts clung about the two strangers. Trouble often hap-



"H'm," he observed, "snake-bit! Over-bit, you might say."

pened over gold-claims. It looked as if some one was taking a fresh interest in the Dragoons. Dad scowled over a claim of his own on which assessment work was almost delinquent. Tomorrow he'd better go up there and do that digging!

AT dawn he turned into the mountains, and for six weeks they held him. When he came out, there was a sample of rich ore in his pocket, in case some speculator might be looking for a mine to develop. His return lay past the dry coulee. Mentally he had marked that spot by its brush clump. He found the place, halted his burros and made a careful circuit of the growth. The body was gone—not destroyed by coyotes nor buzzards, but carried away with no sign remaining.

"H'm," he mused, "Now I wonder—"

That wonderment began to be satisfied as soon as he approached Headstone. For many years the town had remained faintly alive only by virtue of being the county seat, but it was booming now. Much had happened since Dad's departure some months ago.

He met an outbound prospector who told him: A man by the name of Danby had started operating several of the old mines. . . . Cora-Lee Harris was in love—and her sweetheart had been put in jail for assault on Danby.

That Cora-Lee could fall in love, was astonishing to Dad Warren. She had always seemed too much of a desert sprite.

As early as she could throw her gangly legs over a burro's back, she borrowed animals—often without the owners' permission—when prospectors came in, and

went on expeditions of her own, often bedding down for the night and finding food and water with the instinct of a young Apache. Then, growing up from that stage, Cora-Lee found a new interest.

On the spacious desert back of the cabin where she lived, she fenced off a compound, and out of five-gallon oil-cans and packing-cases made shelters for all manner of abandoned creatures. Old broken-down horses were harbored there, sometimes a stray range calf, wild-eyed mongrels in particular, and once for a few hours, a Mexican baby.

Her fence was not very strong, and often the infirmity escaped to parade the streets. No one would help round it up. No one showed sympathy for the beasts. Men stood at the corners and jocosely whooped the parade into stampeding. Cora-Lee showered comments on them in mining-camp language; and it was then that Headstone forgot the unlady-like vigor of its own past and said the Harris girl would turn out bad.

Old Dad Warren thought otherwise. He knew the live-blooded stuff she was made of. He knew also what intense feeling flowed beneath her blunt talk. She poured all that headstrong devotion out on a bunch of poor critters because there was nothing else to do with it.

As Dad shuffled up now from the desert into the pocket of hills surrounding the settlement, Cora-Lee's cabin was the first he approached. It was late afternoon, feeding-time for the infirmity, and he found her out in the compound.

"Hello there, Pops!" she called, coming to the gate with a rumpled feathered something in her arms.

"Howdy, girl."

"In to do the town?"

"Just passin' through," said Dad. It was his stock reply.

He fumbled in one burro pack for a present he had brought—a piece of rose quartz. Cora-Lee stood waiting eagerly, a slim sunny girl in a yellow dress, a trifle impish in the upward quirk of a wide smiling mouth. Her tanned face might have been only mischievous, save for her eyes. Underneath their desert luster they were the soft amethyst of the Dragoons at sundown, as if a haunting love for the purple range had caught and held its very reflection. And in that look, beauty hovered about Cora-Lee Harris—something warm, gently wistful.

Today her eyes showed trouble. Dad pretended not to be aware of it.

"How's the hospital?" he asked. "Any new patients?"

Cora-Lee held up her arms. "This old goose," she answered, smiling. "He blew in here from the north. I've named him Jim."

All of her names had direct bearing on some person in Headstone. Sometimes they were complimentary, sometimes not.

"Who's Jim?" Dad asked, and then saw the first blush he had ever known to flood the rich tan of Cora-Lee's cheeks. She shook her head without answering, turned, and carried Jim back to his oil-can nest. Dad followed.

CORA-LEE was nineteen, but always Dad Warren saw her as he had on a summer's afternoon seven years ago. It was a picture which could never be forgotten: a small girl standing tensely in a bare room, the day Dad had packed her father home, dying from a fall in the shaft of their partnership claim.

Harris' wife, Cora-Lee's stepmother, moaned over him. Cora-Lee stood looking down at the cot—dry-eyed, holding back with clenched fists any display of her fierce love for the gaunt, coarse man. When they had buried him she vanished into the Dragoons for a week—and came back a vagrant spirit of the cañons. Only when she began her desert hospital, did love again show itself greatly.

Following her into the compound, Dad nodded in answer to his own question. Jim, sure now, must be the lover he'd heard about.

"Well, girl," he said, bending and peering over Cora-Lee's shoulder as she knelt with the bird, "let's have a look at this goose. 'Jim,' eh?"

Cora-Lee patted Jim into his straw bed, then turned, her face suddenly beaming. "Dad, I'm in love!"

Old Dad said nothing of his prior knowledge, though his weathered face betrayed his interest.

"How come?" Dad asked. "And where'd you run onto him?"

Laughing, Cora-Lee waved at the goose. "I found them both the same day." Then her face suddenly darkened with pain.

"Jim Evans is *not* a no-good tough!" she burst out. "Of course he did come here looking like sin, and he camped up in a desert mine. He hasn't got a nickel! Yes, and he did jump on that pig of a Danby, and maybe some one did hear him say he'd kill him, too. But there's more, and I wish to seven kinds of green-toed devils I knew what! And now they've got him locked up in jail."

She drew a sharp breath and jumped up. "There! Now you know."

"Nothin' at all," Dad differed. "Suppose we set down somewhere and you begin at discovery and follow clean through this outcrop."

With a little laugh Cora-Lee hugged his arm. "I'm glad you turned up to-day. Come on in the house. You're hungry. I'll fix something to eat first, because there's so much to tell."

The cabin was Cora-Lee herself. Her stepmother, since Tom Harris' death,



had been postmistress at Headstone, and had no time left for home-making. Inside, the one small room was comfortably disordered, full of spirit, furnished with pieces that Cora-Lee had hammered out of kegs and powder-boxes. New paint covered everything.

Dad Warren stamped in and stood looking about. "Been brightenin' up some," he noticed.

Cora-Lee flashed a smile at her gray-green handiwork. Gray and green on the walls, green and gray on the furniture—mixed enough not to be monotonous.

"Oh, yes," she confessed lightly. "They painted the railroad station last month. I took two bucketfuls!"

Dad chuckled. But it struck him suddenly that Cora-Lee should not have to get things by "taking" them. The girl deserved to be given what she wanted. God knew it wasn't much! He looked at her with sympathy in his old heart as she worked busily over the cook-stove.

What a young girl should be and have, came to him in a misty vision from his own youth. He saw New England, with picket fences around houses for which this desert shanty would be a woodshed; girls with ribbons and starched pink dresses, flower-girt walks in gardens no bigger than a room. Then he shrugged, half smiling. This little free-ranger wouldn't fit there; but she ought to be taken care of.

His smile slipped into a scowl. She ought to have somebody; and now she

had gone and got herself a lover—in jail!

Not until Dad had finished a supper of beef pie and cornbread, and they were sitting outside on the cabin steps, was Cora-Lee ready to talk. There with desert twilight spilling its brief glory about them, she told of Jim Evans—and old Dad Warren, slowly pulling on his pipe, saw rather than heard.

HE saw her slim figure bending in the May wind. There was a storm-blown flock of geese overhead. One lagged behind and dropped in weak circles. Cora-Lee scrambled up a ridge in the direction it fell, started down the other side, halted. Some one else had been watching too. An old deserted mine shack was below her, and a man running from the door. She leaped down to claim the bird first, but he was yards ahead of her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That's my goose."

The man looked up with a start, then faced her, holding his prize by its legs.

"I don't see your tag anywhere," he announced.

A little chuckle welled in Cora-Lee's throat. But she held out one hand. "Thank you; if you don't mind—" Now she saw the man was young.

He put the goose behind his back, saying: "I do mind a lot. This is my breakfast, if you want to know it—and lunch and dinner too! But of course," he offered, "if you're as hungry as I am, I'll go fifty-fifty."

"No, no!" Cora-Lee cried. "You can't!" He meant to *eat* that goose!

Even as she clutched it from him and nested it in her arms, she could not keep from looking at the young man's face. He *was* hungry—thin, with his cheeks drawn into gaunt hollows. In a moment of appraising him she tried quickly to read beneath those lines. Was he hiding? She glanced into his eyes and trusted them. No, not a fellow to hide from anybody. He could take care of himself that way. His tall, tense-muscled figure showed strength and good use of it. Then why was he up here in this place, apparently living in it, alone and hungry?

"You do look starved, all right," she said, drawing him out. "And you're afraid to go to town—is that it?"



This little free-ranger had gone and got herself a lover—in jail!
Dad scowled.

The young man shook his head. Suddenly he sat down on a rock and swept off his hat.

"Gosh!" he grinned. "Who are you?" Then before she could reply. "Yes, I am darned near starved. No, I'm not afraid to go to town. Broke, that's all."

Cora-Lee smiled back. He was open about it, anyway. She liked that. "Well," she offered, "let's trade. I'll take this goose home. Then if you will come down with me, I'll cook something."

The man jumped up. "It's a go!"

He rose and went with her down the hill, and by the time they reached her desert cabin she had laughingly named the goose Jim. . . .

Old Dad Warren knocked the ashes from his pipe. "H'm," was his only comment. He'd see this Jim Evans later! Now he was still concerned over Cora-Lee. "What was your man doing before he got himself in jail?" he asked.

Cora-Lee shrugged. "I don't know exactly. He said some day he would explain all about it. The Sheriff won't let me inside, so we haven't even seen each other. One evenin' Jim had a fight with Danby. Somebody heard Jim say, 'Tell the truth or I'll kill you!' He did have a gun, though I know he wouldn't have used it. But he is awfully hot-headed and put up a terrible fight when they took him. All that made things worse."

FOR a time Dad was silent. "Danby, now," he questioned presently; "who is he anyway?"

"A promoter of some sort," Cora-Lee replied. "Came in here with a partner and started this boom by opening several of the old mines. One day the two of them rode off and only Danby came back. Got separated, he said. Later he organized a search-party and they found the other man over toward the Dragoons. A rattler had bit him."

"That so?" said Dad, with not so much as the quickened blink of an amber eye. He slowly replaced the pipe between his teeth. "Go on. What happened next?"

"Why, nothing more, just then."

"Did Jim Evans come before or after the snake-bite business?"

"About a week after they buried the man, I think."

Old Dad sat pondering. "Fights with Danby," he mused aloud, "threatens to kill the man—and for that gets two years. . . . I reckon they'll be taking him away from Headstone soon." He looked at Cora-Lee.



Her eyes glowed with tense yearning; but she said evenly, "I'll wait."

"Yup," Dad vouched, hoisting himself onto his bent legs, "you sure would—two years or twenty!"

He stood gazing off toward the faint skyline of the Dragoons. "Two years for assault is pretty steep," he told the shadows. "Now just who'd want to put that boy away for two years?"

"It's Danby, of course! But why?"

"That's what I was thinkin'." Turning, Dad squinted down Headstone's one street. "Looks mighty crowded. Maybe I'll have to sleep in the jail tonight."

Swiftly intuitive, Cora-Lee clutched his arm. "You old horned-toad! What are you working out? Do you know something?"

"Nary a thing, for certain," he answered, shuffling to his burros. "But I'll see you later, girl."

SHERIFF TOM WHITE, a lank ex-cowman who had taken his present position because it offered a comfortable retirement, was seated alone in his office when Dad Warren entered.

"Howdy, Tom," said Dad.

"How goes it?" asked White, without moving. They were too long in each other's iriendship to need the gesture of a handshake.

Dad took a chair near the Sheriff's desk. "Town's boomin'," he remarked.

"Sort of."

"Peaceable boom?"



"Give it time," said the Sheriff.

"Anyone in jail?"

Quizzically White surveyed the old rover. "What's bit you now?"

Dad explained briefly, though not telling all he knew. White returned his version of Jim Evans' trouble.

"Danby had a buyer for the Rock Bottom mine," he explained, "and was getting the man talked into it, when young Evans storms up to the office, says Danby's title to the Rock Bottom is a fraud and he can't sell. He's all smoked up, the boy is, gets hotter and ends by calling Danby a murderer. Well, hell, you can see Mr. Buyer backing out, right now! Danby and Evans mix in a fight. Jim has a gun, and for that he is charged with assault and battery along with slander that brought about the loss of the Rock Bottom deal; Danby had the buyer in court as a witness to it."

With his eyes on Dad, the Sheriff felt in his shirt pocket for a cigar, found one and chewed off the end. "Strong enough case," he concluded. "And in court young Evans wouldn't or couldn't say anything in defense."

"But two years," Dad persisted, "was too much for assault and slander or anything else Danby could put against the boy, until the whole business was looked into. Seems like somebody wanted quick action—and got it!"

"I know," the Sheriff admitted. "I wish young Evans would talk."

"Maybe he hasn't been processed right," Dad suggested. "There's plenty of

color, so to speak. I'd like to assay it some. Suppose I take a room here."

Tom White grinned. "Go ahead. Help yourself to the best!"

Dad stood up and shuffled down the corridor. Headstone's jail was of the old slatted type where a man in one cell could look into the next and even talk with the prisoner there. It did not matter if they held conversation. In the early days, most men would be buried on Boot Hill before words they traded could be of any use.

Now the jail held a solitary occupant. Passing from door to door, Dad came at last to the closed one, saw a young figure sprawled on a bunk, and selected the next cell for his night's lodging.

"Leave Number Ten as is," he told the Sheriff on his way out.

It was still early evening; time enough for another matter of business. A boom camp keeps late hours. He trudged along the adobe street until he came to a new office with a sign in the window:

D. DANBY. MINES—CLAIMS—PROSPECTS.

Dad entered.

A heavy, red-faced man rose from his desk chair with a well-oiled, "Come in, my friend!"

"Mr. Danby?" Dad asked.

"The same. What can I do for you?"

Dad Warren gave Danby one apparently timid glance and had him ticketed. A long while back he might have been a business man. But something had got him. He'd had money and lost it. He was out to get it back again—in any way he could. Friendly, smooth, with plenty of brains for his work; a hard proposition. One weakness Dad knew about, in his sort: A man like this lived on self-assurance. He had to know that all he did was well covered; let one thing go wrong and he usually cracked.

"Sit down," Danby invited, waving toward a chair.

Dad remained standing, the desk between them, his thin frame slumped over on his right hip, his faded hat with its dents and dilapidated brim still on his head—a wizened old man of the desert. He saw Danby's faint smile.

"I understand you buy claims," he commenced.

Danby seated himself and leaned back with arms folded across his thick body. "Oh, yes," he said, without too much interest. "If they're good."

"Mine's a rich one," Dad declared hopefully.

"Of course," Danby discounted. "They all are."

Dad's bony shoulders drooped.

"Well," he continued, his voice thinner and more timid, "I'd hoped maybe you could ride out and look at what I've struck." He drew a lump of rock from his blue jeans pocket and laid it on the desk.

Danby picked it up. There was no need to test the weight in his palm, nor dig beneath the surface. Gold was in it, plainly visible in tiny seams of rotten quartz. He smiled wisely. "Is there a vein? Or is this all?"

"Mining-man, aren't you?" Dad countered. "You ought to know that a piece like that comes from a ledge."

Danby nodded. "Yes, of course, I know. How far out did you say this claim is, old-timer?"

"Didn't say," Dad corrected. "It's within freightin' distance, if you want to make a mine there. Travelin' the way I do, with burros, it's one night's camp."

"What mountains?" Danby questioned.

Dad returned the ore to his pocket. "I can show a man better'n tell him. Don't know exactly that I want to sell—yet. Just passin' through, and thought I'd see if you'd be interested." He turned away.

Rising quickly, Danby came around the desk to him. "I may be interested, old-timer. Certainly. Suppose we have a look at the claim. Here, how about a hundred dollars on account?"

"No," Dad refused, shaking his white head. "Aint so sure now. In the mornin' I'll see you again."

"Do that!" Danby invited. His huge soft bulk settled back upon the desk-top. "I think we can get together," he said.

DAD retired to his cell early. Habit made him drowsy after sundown. But this night he did not sleep. Hooking a miner's candlestick on a cross slat of one partition, he settled onto a stool and with a knife-blade began to pick at his lump of ore. Presently he was aware of two eyes watching through the small open squares. He did not look up.

"Rich stuff, that is," said a voice from the adjoining cell.

Dad nodded. "Yup."

A time of silence, broken only by the knife's scratching.

"Looks like Dragoon quartz."

To himself Dad confided, "That's more'n Danby knew!" Still absorbed, he answered, "How'd you know?"

"I've seen lots of it." The voice was suddenly bitter. "Too damn' much of it!"

"So have I," Dad agreed. "I'm selling my claim."

"Not to anyone around here!"

"Yup. Danby's interested."

No answer. Dad looked up and came level with a lean face bent into the candlelight. Intent gray eyes studied him. Shadow lay across the nose and mouth; light again caught a long, sweeping jaw. So this was Cora-Lee's Jim! A strong-headed one, Dad granted; but not plain stubborn. Look at those eyes!

It was with a blaze of challenge in those eyes that Jim Evans said, "If you deal with Danby, you're a damn' fool!"

"I be that anyway," admitted Dad amiably. "Nature don't make 'em all smart, like—well, like Danby himself."

Gray eyes narrowed and peered closer, losing some of their gleam for a look of puzzled interest. "What are you driving at, old man?"

Dad continued to pick gold from his lump of quartz. "Why, Danby wants to take a ride with me tomorrow. Like as not I'd get snake-bit. Perhaps I might get over-bit."

"Talk sense!" Jim Evans directed. "You aren't off your nut. What is this you're giving me?"

Dad put down the rock, drew out his pipe, stuffed it with tobacco, and then in



the added flare of a match, gave Jim a final scrutiny.

"Mining-man, aren't you, young fellow?" he queried, after the first puff.

Jim answered with a short laugh: "Not your kind, old-timer. According to the university, I'm a graduate engineer. But what I know is still in the books."

Dad approved. "Looking for a job?"

"Not for two years," said Jim evenly. "The circuit judge just handed me that."

"Two years!" Dad repeated. "For what?"

As no answer came back, he glanced through the bars. Jim Evans had turned away.

Again Dad took up his quartz and began to pick at it. "I reckon I ought to get a good price from Danby," he said.

"For God's sake," Evans snapped, whirling, "why do you keep bringing up that name? What are you trying to do—squat there and get my goat? You know why I'm here." He bent down in sudden thought. "Say, what are *you* here for?"

"To sleep," said Dad. "Costs nothing."

"Then it's true you've got a claim to sell?" Jim probed. "And you've come in to deal with Danby? Well, I'll give you some advice."

"Don't need any," Dad declined.

"The hell you don't! Listen! Danby is the slickest kind of a crook. He'd kill a man! If you show him something good, he'll get you the way he got—"

Dad heard Jim leap up, pace the cell, come back and drop onto his bunk. His

voice broke hoarsely. "You damned old fool, I know what I'm talking about! Danby—Danby— Oh, what the hell! If it will do you any good, I'll tell you. Danby killed my brother!"

Dad remained motionless, the gold quartz in one hand, his knife in the other. Within Jim Evans the barrier was down. He had to talk, and the right sort of ear was turned toward him.

JOHN EVANS had been the name of Danby's partner. Soon after his death it developed that he owed Danby sums of money. The debts were covered by mortgages on his half of their partnership property, and the notes were overdue. Danby became sole owner.

"Those notes were faked!" Jim declared. "But my brother kept all business in his own hands. There was no way to prove a thing. Danby was wise to that. What I know is that John wouldn't have gone in debt to Danby. A bank would have carried him if he needed money; and they'd had a little trouble before. Danby forged John's signature. I know it! Then he killed my brother. I'm certain of that, too!"

He sprang up. "At first, all I wanted was to get a settlement of some kind out of him—follow up what I'm sure of. Then one night I jumped onto him. Couldn't help it. And that was where I was a damn' fool." Jim hesitated. His gray, heated eyes closed in anguish. "A fellow is a damn' fool," he said bitterly, "to get in trouble when there's some one else to consider."

"And Cora-Lee Harris," Dad told him, "is worth considering."

"Cora-Lee! Do you know her?"

Dad put out one hand in the candlelight. "Ever since she was that high to a jackass."

"I lost my head trying to get around Danby," Jim confessed. "After I'd found Cora-Lee I wanted everything—for her! There's a million in that property. Do you know the Rock Bottom mine?"

Dad's fingers tightened on his gold quartz. "Did your brother own it?"

"Every foot! That was the main thing Danby wanted, and had signed over to himself. The Rock Bottom has never been worked right. I surveyed it before my brother bought. The old company cut above the finest body of ore you ever broke into."

Dad himself had guessed that. Ore there was almost as rich as the prospect lump he held in his hand. Young Evans'



fire caught him. A million in it some day—a million, for Cora-Lee! The game little devil didn't know; Jim was not the sort to flash that in her eyes.

"Young fellow," he said, his slow voice showing none of the determined purpose that for many minutes had been forming, "it's late. Suppose you turn in and get a good night's sleep. You may need it."

Evans peered back at him. "What do you mean—need it?"

"Nothing," Dad countered, pulling off his boots and preparing to follow his own advice. "See you tomorrow."

At dawn, while the next cell was still quiet, he went out and found Sheriff White.

"Tom," he announced, "I'm going to borrow the office force here, includin' yourself and your prisoner."

White looked puzzled, yet agreeable. "Well—why, yes, if you have a reason."

Dad Warren was sure he did. . . .

In the heat of mid-afternoon two burros, a horseman, and a dusty old figure afoot, traveled slowly northward to the Dragoons.

"Didn't know your claim was so far out this direction," grumbled Danby.

Dad Warren answered from under his hat-brim: "Richest part of the country."

"Never been here," Danby declared.

"You'll see something, then," promised Dad.

After that he drew down his head as a desert tortoise might, and was silent.

ABOUT dusk he turned into a coulee and continued upward. From under shaggy brows he watched for a landmark. Suddenly he halted one of his burros, and jerked up a front hoof.

"You, Jennifer!" he exploded. "You'd have to do that!"

"What's the trouble?" Danby asked irritably. "Come on, let's keep moving." He spurred his horse ahead.

"Better wait," Dad offered. "This here damn' burro," he complained, "has rock-bruised a foot."

Jennifer pointed two long, furry ears at him in puzzled questioning. "You dumb fool!" he scolded her.

Danby sat staring up the coulee, his huge body erect, his eyes darting along the gravel bottom. "I'm no desert rat," he scoffed, "but I'd say we could take a better route than this. Let's turn back to where it's not so rocky."

Dad shook his head. As he continued to hold Jennifer's one leg up, she tired

and trembled. "See?" he verified. "A thing like that hurts her." With a resigned shrug he put down the hoof. "Well, we'll have to make camp. Be all right by morning."

Abruptly the other man wheeled back.

"We can't camp here!"

"Why not?"

"No water. Let the fool hop along. Isn't there a spring over this next ridge?"

Dad glanced up at him. "That so?"

"I've studied the maps," Danby explained readily; but without further argument he climbed from his horse. "Do as you like," he consented.

"Good enough camp," said Dad, looking around. "We've got a keg of water. And that brush clump yonder is a tight windbreak."

Danby stared at it and moved away to unsaddle his horse.

After throwing off the burros' packs, Dad returned to the growth, broke off a handful of twigs and built a fire. "Crooked-looking stuff," he pointed out. "Indians call it snakeweed."

Danby was stretching his legs and pacing nervously about the coulee bottom. He turned, scowling through the dusk, but said nothing.

"These Indians sure are queer coots," Dad continued, adding more of the black sticks to his fire. "Their minds sort of run to things a white man don't see. Like this brush. . . . Now, I aint reminded of snakes."



"You take a man that's been bit by a rattler, now—the Indians say he don't really die."



Danby choked on a name: "John!"

"Me neither," said Danby, coming closer. "Still, Indians are wise." He lifted his bed-roll from where Dad had dropped it near the clump, and selected a bare spot farther off. "They probably mean snakes live in there. I'll not sleep too close."

"Rattlers might," Dad agreed.

He shook utensils from a gunny-sack, and squatting by the fire, began to cook a meal. His old voice rambled on, garrulous, yet knowing.

"Indians," he insisted, "do get up the damndest yarns! You take a man that's been bit by a rattler, now—they say he don't really die, like as if he'd been shot or somethin'. No sir; somehow a rattler's venom preserves his soul, sort of the same as puttin' it in alcohol. He goes wanderin' around, never gettin' very far from where he was bit. Fact! I've come mighty nigh believin' it. One time I seen—"

"Is that my horse?" Danby broke in, throwing up his head.

Dad looked. "Where?"

"Thought I heard him running."

BOTH men listened, turning to stare through twilight that had settled upon the coulee in a vague still mist.

"Nothin'," declared Dad. "Might have been a jack-rabbit."

He browned some strips of bacon in his frying-pan. "Well, as I was sayin'—" he began again.

"Forget it!" Danby snapped. He had remained fixed, save for his eyes. Drawn by some strong fascination, they were moving from the brush clump to a cer-

tain spot on the gravel beyond it, up the coulee side, and back again. "Funny," he said hoarsely, "I thought I heard—"

The fire had burned to coals. Dad raked on a fresh branch. It was green and sent a ribbon of smoke up into the still air. He peered covertly along the coulee rim, waiting.

Danby's trailing voice stopped short.

Dad again held his frying-pan over the fire. "Dig in and eat," he invited. "What's the matter? Seein' things? Nothin' up there." But he knew what Danby had glimpsed; he too had seen the flat black hat move for an instant upon the sand crest, so dim and fleeting that it might easily have been more the trick of an eye unused to desert dusk. "Nothin' yonder," he repeated.

With a shrug, Danby turned. "Of course there isn't! I know that. Look here, old man." He paused, and Dad saw the swift calculating of his mind.

"WE didn't have to come up this dry coulee," Danby acknowledged. "We didn't have to camp at this place—you haven't brought me out to get money on a mining claim! All right, talk business! I know your sort; no use of me trying to bluff you off. No use, either, of you trying to work on my nerves with a lot of fool ghost-yarning." He smiled blandly, ending, "You see I don't scare worth a damn. So speak up: What do you know, and what do you want?"

Dad put his tin plate down on the gravel and bent a little forward to point a knotted finger close into Danby's face. "You killed John Evans," he stated, "right here, exactly six weeks and three days ago." With his finger moving to each detail, he continued: "You knocked him down, there. You killed a rattler and stuck its fangs in his arms. You threw the snake yonder, in that bush. Want any more proof of what I know?"

"That's enough," said Danby. His voice fell into its persuasive note—one to be used in wheedling an old man. "We can get together. Of course. Come straight out with whatever price you have in mind."

"I've got a claim for sale," said Dad flatly, "for ten thousand dollars." He squatted back on his haunches and with purpose let himself slump sidewise. The movement thrust his gun out from his hip. Worn metal shone in the firelight.

Danby picked up a cup. "I'll think about it," he said. "Let's eat." He hunched closer. "Give me some coffee."

Dad leaned to grasp the steaming pot; instantly he felt his gun jerked from its holster.

"Now, you damned old fool," snarled Danby, "get up!"

"Nope." Dad shook his head.

"Get up, I say!" Danby ordered, his big voice a savage rumble. "Get up and walk where I tell you. Thought you had



me stuck for ten thousand, eh? Then another ten to keep your mouth shut the next time you come to town! Good God—you played this game like a jackass!"

Dad remained squatted on the ground. Danby stood over him, the gun gripped in his fist like a club. Suddenly he raised his arm. Dad threw up a hand to ward off a blow that did not fall. He looked. The other man was rigid, frozen with his eyes upon the coulee bank where something had risen full height against the dim skyline—flat hat, long black coat—a gaunt deathly figure that came with stark menace down through the twilight.

Danby choked on a name. "John!" It was but a breath. His huge body shuddered as self-control broke into a swift, frenzied act. He aimed the gun and pressed twice on the trigger. Yet the specter of John Evans came steadily on. Dad Warren always carried his old weapon empty.

FOR a second Danby seemed unaware that it had misfired. Then his jaw sagged. Truth flashed to him, and knowledge that he had fallen into a trap

was worse than terror. Through one unnerved moment he stood powerless to move.

Then the apparition sprang down, Jim Evans pulling off the flat hat, while at his back other forms followed.

Danby whirled to run. Dad tripped him. Before the man could rise, Sheriff White had his wrists in steel rings.

"You saw everything?" Dad asked. "And heard what he said?"

"Plenty!" White asserted. "With Cora-Lee and a deputy for witnesses."

DAD looked beyond the Sheriff's back at a third person who had halted there. "Howdy, Cora-Lee!" he hailed her. Then because the tense spell remained upon her face: "Still figurin' to wait two years?"

She turned in a quick glance, and from beside her Jim Evans answered, "Ask the Sheriff, Dad. And we're much obliged to you!"

A deputy came down the bank with horses.

Tom White faced Dad. "Going in to town?"

The old man shook his head. "No, reckon not. You have my sworn statement of what I found here last month. What you just saw and heard will cinch things, won't it? Sort of give Jim a retrial, changin' 'slander' to fact, and 'assault' to self-defense?"

White nodded. "I'll get busy."

"Then that's all I care," Dad finished. "Do what you like with *that*!" He jerked a thumb toward Danby.

Cora-Lee came near and clutched his arm. "Better stop awhile, please," she begged. "Come on back with us."

"No, girl," he answered; "thanks. Might as well go on, since I'm this far. I'll see you again, when I'm passin' through."

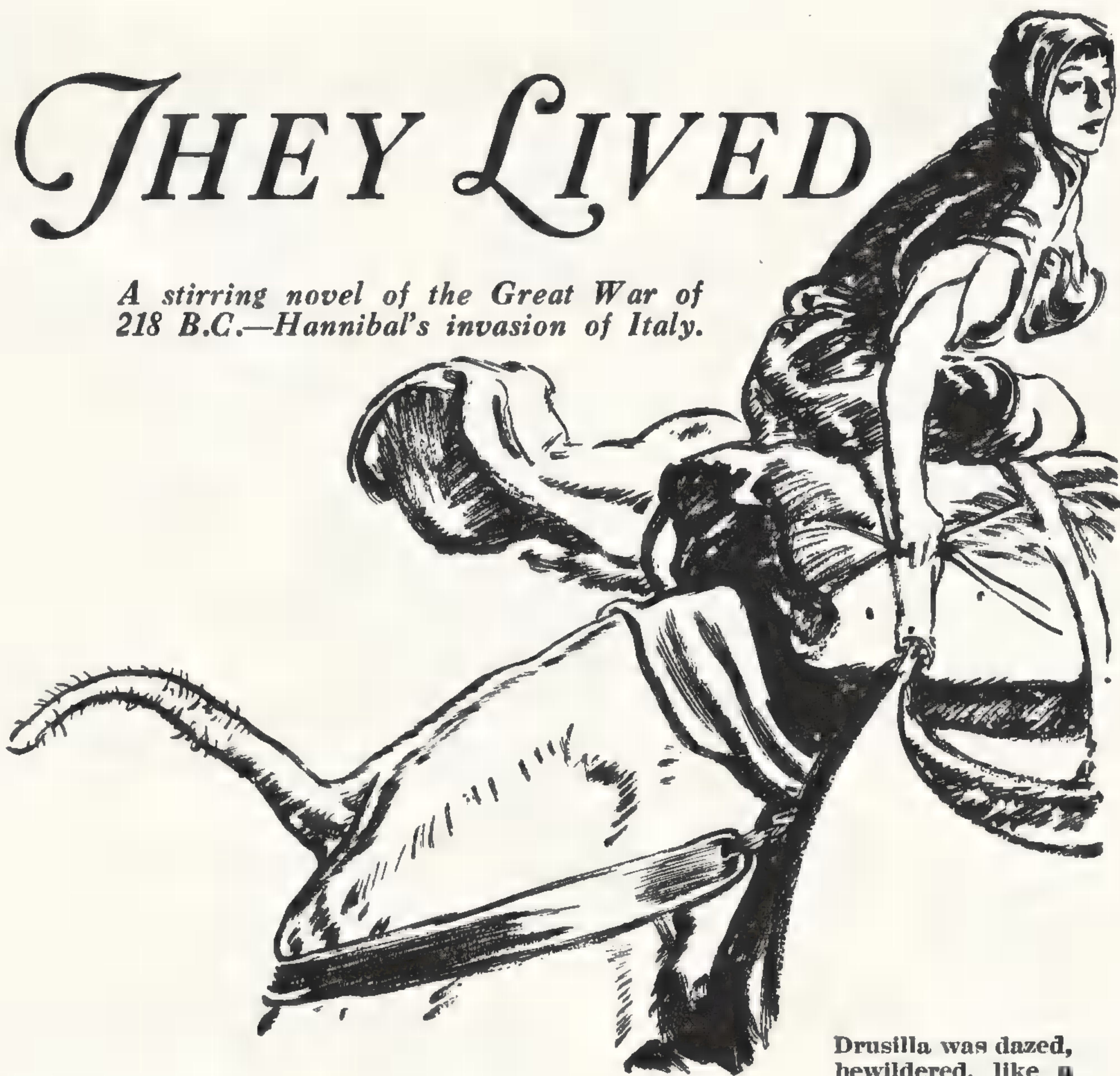
She gave his arm a quick hug, and smiled with misty eyes. "Of course you will!"

Soon the party rode away: White, Danby, and the deputy leading off—while behind youth lingered, at a time when youth cannot be hurried. . . .

Dad repacked his burros. It struck him as a good night to walk—cool, and now with brilliant stars. Bareheaded, shuffling along in their flood of light, he plodded up past the coulee source, past the tree-fringed water-hole, and melted into the next low ridge beyond—a contented wanderer on the desert's face, a gleaner of rough gold.

THEY LIVED

*A stirring novel of the Great War of
218 B.C.—Hannibal's invasion of Italy.*



Drusilla was dazed,
bewildered, like a
child.

The Story Thus Far:

WAR and war and war!" said the village mayor gloomily. "Now the African hordes move up the Rhone to bring us fire and sword! Why should this be?"

The exiled Roman Mancinus shrugged. "Why, you ask, this unwanted war? Because the earth is too full of people. Perhaps the gods seek to thin out the race of men. A nation becomes drunk with dreams of glory and loot. They're led to it by the magnetic character of some great leader. Hannibal is such a man, from all accounts."

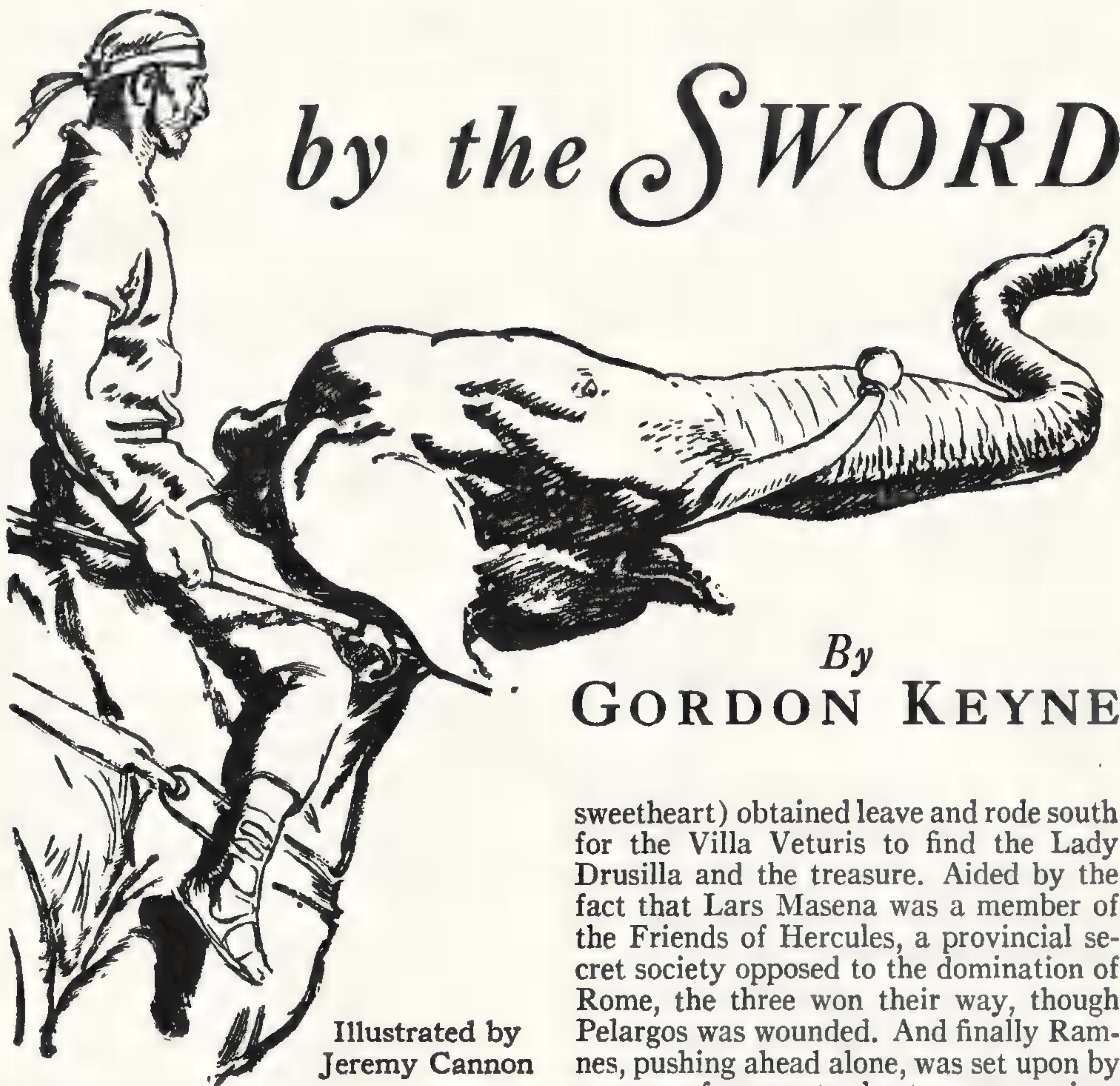
He soon had opportunity to learn for himself. But first came his momentous encounter with the professional soldier Pelargos, a gigantic slinger who had served under the father of Mancinus, who had been commander of the Fourteenth Legion. Caught in a trap during the last Punic War, Marcus Mancinus had given parole in order to save the lives of his men, of whom Pelargos had been one. But as punishment he had been sentenced to exile; and in consequence his embittered

son was living as a farmer in this little Alpine valley.

Mancinus struck up a friendship with Pelargos; and when the Lady Drusilla, daughter of the former consul Quintus Veturis, passed through the town under the escort of Scipio, Pelargos told a strange story. "I was with Veturis when he died," said Pelargos, "and at the last he spilled a few secrets. . . . Close to the Veturis estates in Umbria is the grotto of Lamnia the Sybil. Some of the treasures of Rome were hidden there, just before the Gauls sacked the city; and those who knew the secret died."

"Veturis, when out hunting, discovered a hillside opening and made his way into long caverns; he saw the treasure, but because of superstition about the Sybil, he never went back. But he told of it in delirium, when he was dying. Well, I know the secret. And no one else does."

Pelargos proposed that Mancinus join him in a raid on the cave. The exile hesitated; and then—Hannibal and his army and his great war elephants came rolling



Illustrated by
Jeremy Cannon

by the *SWORD*

By
GORDON KEYNE

up the valley. A day later Mancinus, changing his name to Ramnes, had enlisted in the service of Hannibal as guide; soon thereafter, with Pelargos, he shared Hannibal's desperate battles against the mountain tribes of the Alpine passes.

Wounded and worn-out, Ramnes was left to recover in a village while Pelargos and the other survivors fought their way on. Finally came a letter from Pelargos telling Ramnes that his exiled father's estates—his own rightful inheritance—had been usurped by his cousin also named Mancinus. More, this Mancinus was an evil fellow who possessed a dagger poisoned by some subtle drug so that even the smallest wound from it deprived the victim of all will-power. And Mancinus sought to win the Lady Drusilla and join her estates to his. . . . Ramnes sent Croton, a slave, with a letter seeking to warn Drusilla.

As captain of slingers, Pelargos bore an important part in Hannibal's great victory at Trebia. Afterward Ramnes and Pelargos and the elephant-trainer Lars Masena (who sought a boyhood

sweetheart) obtained leave and rode south for the Villa Veturis to find the Lady Drusilla and the treasure. Aided by the fact that Lars Masena was a member of the Friends of Hercules, a provincial secret society opposed to the domination of Rome, the three won their way, though Pelargos was wounded. And finally Ramnes, pushing ahead alone, was set upon by a gang of peasants, beaten unconscious and only saved from death by the timely arrival of the Lady Drusilla herself. (*The story continues in detail:*)

"DID Croton give you his warning about Mancinus—about the dagger of Eryx?" asked Ramnes.

Drusilla nodded, a swift anger springing in her face.

Four days had passed since Ramnes' rough reception, and he, his bruises healing, sat watching her working over the fine washed wool and making it ready for the spinning-wheel. Odd, he thought, that she who was so thoroughly the Roman matron of rank, personally supervising everything on the estate, should have so little Roman in her character.

She held up a bit of the fleece.

"See how it glints and sparkles in the sun? That's a sign of the finest quality wool. My grandfather imported some Phrygian sheep, forty years ago."

"Afraid to talk or think about Croton, are you?"

She flashed him a look.

"I hate being angry, and all this makes my blood boil," she said. "But I suppose

we must talk it out sooner or later, so let's get it done."

"You've evaded the issue every time I've brought it up."

She assented with a cool gesture. "I'm none too sure of you, Ramnes; of why you're here and what you want. You've evaded, too. Mention the future, and you shy like a frightened horse."

He laughed. "Why not? I've told you what's planned, so far as I know it."

"Nonsense! You and that man Pelargos and the elephant-man—looking up long-lost families and loves?" Scorn flared in her voice. "Yes, that sounds like Pelargos; a cynic mouthing many words, jeering at the world."

"How old are you, Drusilla?"

"Twenty-three."

Not sure of him, no doubt divining his reticence. He had not mentioned the supposed treasure. No word had come from Pelargos and Lars Masena.

"I've been afraid of the truth; I still am," he said. "Do you know where the grotto of Lamnia the Sybil lies?"

"The place accursed? Yes. Three miles from here. All the world shuns it."

"That's one reason I'm here. You're the chief reason. Let's risk the truth! First, tell me about Croton. He expected that you would protect him and obtain justice for him."

She winced at this. "Mancinus had behaved shamefully here, after I went hurriedly to join my father in Gaul," she said, her blue eyes sultry with anger as they looked out across the valley. "He hated us, you see; for reasons. He took what he wanted, made a slave of Croton—all for the service of the republic, of course. The day after Croton came home, I went into Reate. Two senators from Rome were there, a commission sent to establish a war-supply service and to arrange new treaties with the Latin tribes. I appealed to them for justice and demanded that Mancinus be punished. They—well, they were very Roman."

She broke off, her voice bitter.

"I threatened to go to Rome and get justice from Scipio, who's consul now," she went on. "An excellent plan, they agreed; but he's with the army. Oh, they were smooth, polite, ironic! You see, I've no family in Rome; my father's friends are in the army. Better, they said, to make sacrifices for the good of the republic, in this time of crisis. The truth is that my mother was Sabine, not Roman; they even flung that in my face and advised me to marry a Roman."

"Oh! Mancinus?" put in Ramnes, and she nodded. "Evidently, our good cousin has high-placed friends. But go on."

"While I was in the city, Mancinus was here, looking for me. He found Croton. He and some others were drunk. They killed Croton, the slaves and shepherds attacked them, the villa was burned. I got home to find one officer, a centurion, still here, looting."

"And you cursed him, and he died a few days later," said Ramnes.

"Oh!" Her eyes went to him, wide and startled. He had not told her of that affair near Spoletium. "He died? How?"

"By my sword. Come, let's have it out!" Ramnes faced her, gravely intent. "I'm not here to make peace, but war. You know I was with Hannibal; I may be with him again. I've turned my back on Rome. But you, Drusilla, may hate me for this."

"Hate you?" She looked at him steadily. "Did I seem to hate you, that day we first met in the shadow of the Alps? You, whose father saved my father's life?"

"No, you did not; but I was no open enemy of Rome, then. You gave the only words of sympathy ever granted my father. Yet you're Roman in blood, in education, in all that you are; the sort of woman typical of the republic's traditions, the finest and noblest—"

"Ramnes, for those words I could almost hate you!" she broke in, low-voiced, tense. "So that's why you've so closely guarded your tongue! You forget that the women of the oldest families in Rome came from Sabine stock. You forget that I'm more Sabine than Roman. What have I to do with those cold, callously cruel, deadly practical Romans? For twenty years the Sabine people have been ground down and oppressed by such men as this Mancinus. If a Roman has such vision and warmth and nobility that he cannot conform to their barbarous virtues, they kill or exile him; your father was that sort of man, as I've heard my father say."

THE torrential words rushed from her in a blaze of emotion. Ramnes half sprang to his feet, then relaxed abruptly.

"All very well, Drusilla; but Rome, to your spirit, is still Rome."

"Yes," she said passionately. "A state that crushes out every spiritual factor, that grinds the individual into the common mold; a state whose ideal is a relentless efficiency for the common good—no,

no! People don't exist to serve the state like slaves! Rather, the state exists for the people, for humanity, as in the Greek democracies. There's a higher, nobler force than mere brutal might! Rome may grow great on brutality, but in the end she'll perish and contribute nothing to the world!"

"Slightly exaggerated, I fear, but in the main well said!" With a laugh, Ramnes was on his feet, his face alight, his eyes shining and eager. "I never suspected this; I thought you a woman, I find you a goddess! Magnificent!"

"A goddess? Don't talk like a silly shepherd boy," she said with new bitterness. "I'm merely a woman—prey for the strongest. A woman, to be dragged down by Mancinus the proprætor to gutter level; to be defiled and shamed and mocked—eh? What is it?"

She looked up suddenly, as he reached out and touched her, putting his hand on her shoulder, smiling down into her eyes.

"You've made me realize something, Drusilla. The broken and the helpless, the exiled and friendless, the outcasts who have nothing to follow except the gleam of heart's desire—why, that's what we all are! You, I, Pelargos, Lars—and by the gods, four strands to a rope make it stronger than three!"

His voice leaped up, vibrant, ringing. "What's to do for such as we? Rage against the world like mad dogs, destroying, tearing down? No! Come, follow the gleam with us, find our heart's desire and build upon it, grow strong in it!"

"So?" Her blue eyes kindled. "You've guarded your tongue well. What, then, is your own heart's desire? You've told me what the other two seek. What's yours?"

"You."

The one word—finality, decision, laconic strength, and gaze unfaltering. Her breath came more swiftly. She opened her lips to speak; then her eyes flickered away, her face changed, she came abruptly to her feet.

"Not now. Who's this?"

Ramnes turned, in startled surprise. Neither of them had observed the approaching horseman, until an irruption of dogs with full-throated alarm revealed his presence. A shout broke from Ramnes, a shout of mingled greeting and laughter, as the strange figure swung from the saddle, and Drusilla hastily called off the dogs.

Pelargos—but what a Pelargos it was! That long shape was cloaked in woman's garb, with floating woolen mantle tucked

tight under the chin, and heavy braids of dark hair issuing from below the wide-brimmed Umbrian hat. A strange, gaunt woman of some hill tribe by his looks. Not until the name reached her ears did Drusilla comprehend who it was.

"Laugh, confound you!" exclaimed Pelargos. "Laugh, split your sides. Make a joke of it all! But I tell you they've got every road patrolled, they're combing every nook and corner; that business near Spoletium has put the hounds out after Pelargos in full cry! If I hadn't ridden most of the way here with a dozen country-folk supplied by the friends of Lars, I'd never have got through! Lady Drusilla, salutations. You remember me?"

HE tore off hat and wig, ripped away the woman's gown and mantle, and grunted angrily to the roars of laughter from Ramnes. Drusilla conquered her mirth, greeted him, and spoke to the slaves and servants who came running and staring. The bald head and incredibly lanky figure emerging from this woman's costume brought fresh laughter from Ramnes, and with a sheepish grin Pelargos joined in it.

"Oh, the hurt's doing well enough," he said, when mirth settled into questions. "Lars will be here tonight, if all goes well. Lady, it's a long time and a long road since we laid your father to rest in Farther Gaul; my service to you. Perhaps you have a trifle of wine to spare a thirsty soul? My vow's ended, comrade, and I've kept it till now."

A table was brought, wine and fruit arrived, and when the three were alone Pelargos stretched out comfortably, his birdlike eyes seeking Drusilla.

"Did this grinning rascal tell you of the flea he put in the proprætor's ear?"

"No," said Ramnes hastily. "We've been getting acquainted ever since I arrived; in fact, I've just now reached the point of talking freely. Some of the local shepherds took me for a Roman, greeted me with slings and clubs. Hang it all, Drusilla is one of us! I was a fool not to trust her from the start."

Pelargos gulped his wine and stared.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but let it pass. Your brush with Mancinus had results; apparently he's discovered that you were no emissary from Rome, for he's got rewards out for you, also. The roads are hot with cavalry. Haven't any been here?"

"No. My people are on watch," Drusilla said. "They must have taken you



"You're not afraid of the curse?" exclaimed Ramnes.

for a woman, since they gave no word of your coming. Now, suppose you let that tongue of yours have free rein, and make up for the silence of Ramnes! Tell me everything."

"Gladly. Do you go to Eryx with us?"

"Why should I?" she said, with her level look.

"You'd better. Mancinus has got you appointed a ward of the state, is coming here to see you. If the deviltry is as Croton said, you'll have to jump fast! Lars said last night that Mancinus is boasting you'll be his wife in three days."

He went on, talking fast and furiously as the wine flexed his tongue. He told

Drusilla all that Ramnes had not, and spared himself no glory in telling of the Trebia battle. She made caustic comment, with a lift of her brows.

"You were always rated a braggart, Pelargos. Need you boast now, when you're at the end of your rope?"

His bright eyes searched her face for a moment.

"Sometimes my boasting has a purpose, lady," he said gravely. "The man who thinks well of himself, is thought well of by others; when there's great work to be done, swaggering lends confidence. Look how the Romans boast about their work at sea, spreading the story that a wrecked

Punic galley taught them to build ships, and eventually to scatter the navy of Carthage! That's pure brag, to build up the Roman name."

"Isn't it true?" asked Ramnes curiously, and Pelargos snorted.

"Shipwrights and seamen aren't made in a day. Ancus Martius, the fourth king of Rome, had great shipyards. Two hundred years before Duilius beat the Punic fleet, a reach of the Tiber was expressly set apart for ship construction. Immediately after the Tarquins were expelled, a treaty with Carthage assigned limits for the Roman fleet. Why, the earliest Roman money bore the image of a ship's prow, to show sea power! No, no, lady. I, who war against the gods, am hoping now to create a god, so let me strut and swagger as I will."

"Your windy words seem to hide some sense," said Drusilla, frowning, "but I don't like vague allusions. Just what do you propose?"

"Aye," said Ramnes. "Let's have definite plans."

Pelargos dissented. "Not yet; don't flourish the palm before you win the race. All our future depends on certain elements; tonight when Lars arrives, I'll know the best or the worst, and lay everything before you. Fair enough?"

"So it seems," Drusilla answered. "But why should I go to Eryx?"

"For friendship and safety. You've none here."

"Mancinus can't harm me. That silly story about using the dagger—"

"BY Hercules, it's not silly! It's true!" exclaimed Pelargos vehemently. "In Reate and Interamna were three men, powerful leaders of the people, who hated Rome, distrusted Mancinus, and set the people against him. I don't know their names, but Lars does; he got the whole story. Where are those three leaders today? Half-imbecile, servile sycophants of the proprætor, their wealth and power turned over to him. A judgment of the gods, says Mancinus! No, lady, that accursed weapon is an actual fact. Let him but prick your arm, as by accident, and you become his slave."

"I don't believe it. I'm not afraid of him!" she broke out.

"Well, I am," said Pelargos. "But Ramnes isn't."

"For the last time, will you give some definite reason why I should go to Eryx? You have more in view than merely finding your family again?"

"Yes." Pelargos rubbed his long nose. "Go, then, because we go. Eryx is beyond the present reach of Rome. The first need is money; ours is about used up. If all goes well, I hope to leave here tomorrow evening—and we'll go like gods! Ramnes, did you tell her the secret that her father told me?"

Ramnes shook his head. Pelargos gestured irritation.

"You've certainly wasted time! We must find that treasure, or give up the idea, this very day. Talk about destiny! It's driving us like a millrace—you don't know our friend Mancinus has his eye on Eryx? Aye; plans to get its wealth and man-power for the use of Rome—"

"Pelargos," cut in Drusilla gently, but with a sweetness that tokened danger, "either abandon your vagueness this minute, or I leave you. What secret did my father tell you?"

Suddenly blunt and direct, Pelargos told of the treasure. Ramnes watched to see how the story affected her; a breath of relief shook him, delight seized him, when her blue eyes kindled and color rose in her cheeks, and she came quickly to her feet.

"Good! We'll get horses, and prove or disprove these words, without delay."



"You're not afraid of the curse?" exclaimed Ramnes.

She gave him a level look.

"I fear the gods, Ramnes, and reverence them; but I neither fear nor reverence Rome. Luckily, we have your two horses and that of Pelargos. I'll be ready in five minutes."

She turned toward the cottage, calling the slaves. Pelargos looked at Ramnes, and chuckled softly.

"All's well, comrade. Never blurt things out to a woman till the right moment; make her force the issue, and she's yours. Once you know the trick, it's easily done."

"Oh, you're a human marvel," Ramnes said dryly. "Is it true Mancinus is coming here?"

"Yes." Pelargos knit his brows. "And, if everything else works out, you'll have the hardest job of all as your contribution to the common good! One I don't envy you by half, either. But let it wait—depends on the treasure, on Lars, on Drusilla. Here she comes."

The horses were brought; Drusilla mounted; the three went riding off.

They cut away from the long valley, following the stream that wended back through the hills, where sheep grazed beneath towering chestnuts and massive oaks. In half an hour they reached what Pelargos declared to be the spot, Veturis having mentioned certain landmarks; but finding any cave entrance was another matter.

NOON was near when Drusilla, pushing through a tangled thicket, lifted a call that brought the others. There, under an overhang of rock, showed an orifice dark and jagged, completely hidden away.

"Veturis killed a wolf here," said Pelargos. "Smells clean. Fire, comrade?"

"Wait here," spoke up Drusilla excitedly. "I'll ride back—we have torches ready for use. I'll bring them, and something to eat, and fire."

She was gone with a leap for the horses, running lightly, her briar-torn robe fluttering.

Pelargos gazed after her.

"What a woman!" he ejaculated. "There was never a goddess equal to that flesh and blood and brain! You're lucky, comrade. Well, this looks as though we'd see Eryx and no mistake. When we fell in with Lars, I knew the fates were weaving their web for us! By the way, I neglected to mention that the son of

Marcus Mancinus is even more badly wanted than I am."

Ramnes started. "What? You mean they know who I am? Or rather who I was?"

"Precisely; Romans aren't fools. I didn't tell you in front of Drusilla, for the words have an ugly sound. That fellow Alimentus talked a lot; the officers who were with Scipio, when you met Drusilla, have talked. It's known that a real Roman was with Hannibal. It's one thing for a hireling like me to turn against Rome, but for a Roman-born to do so, puts foam at their lips! Add to this, the natural hatred of Mancinus for his relative. In short, the man who kills you and brings in your traitor's head gets wealth and rank."

Ramnes laughed harshly. "Very well! My head will cost them something."

"I trust so; but gold's the first and most loyal friend in case of need. And if we find this Roman gold and make it fight for us—ha! Beautiful irony! I'm going to take a look inside there, to make sure we're not on a false lead."

He rose, made his way through the close thicket, and vanished through the opening, which was large enough to admit him when doubled up.

RAMNES sat in tumultuous thought. They knew him? Let them! It was of small account, beside the astonishing revelation of Drusilla, of all that lay in her heart and mind. When Pelargos came scrambling out, grimed and cursing, to report a certainty of caverns, Ramnes scarcely heard; he told the other all that had passed, all that had been said.

Pelargos rubbed his nose, scratched his bald pate, shook his head doubtfully.

"Comrade, you and she alike are idealists, of a sort. I'm not. I don't comprehend just what all your fine words are about; but my family's in Eryx, Lars will find his heart's desire there, you'll find—what? A future, if things work aright. Did Croton tell you the origin of this dagger Mancinus now has?"

"The dagger of Eryx?" And Ramnes frowned. "Something about the gods; I don't remember."

"The gods, aye. Those Greeks are superstitious."

"How do you know so much about Eryx, anyhow, Pelargos?" demanded Ramnes bluntly. "You said your father was a Greek. You were born in Spain."

Pelargos grinned. "He was a Greek, yes; from Eryx. Chew on that, com-

rade!" And he leaped up. "Ha! Here comes our fire and light; now for the loot of Rome! You'll be more likely to see it than Hannibal will, if I'm any judge."

AS Drusilla arrived, her horse blowing, Pelargos seized one of the torches she bore and lit it at the pot of embers; fanning it into flame, he went plunging for the cave entrance. Ramnes motioned Drusilla to follow, and himself brought up the rear, with extra torches.

The opening admitted them freely. Inside, the ruddy light of Pelargos guided them along a fairly large cavern which ran endlessly, it seemed. Bones littered the floor but there was no token of human visitation.

Suddenly the light ahead disappeared. Darkness enveloped them. Drusilla uttered one low gasp; then Ramnes caught her hand.

"Come along—the passage has turned, that's all."

Her fingers gripped his; something was born between them on the instant, as though this touch of the hand demolished some final barrier. Their voices rang with hollow echoes from the cavern roof, a foot or two overhead. They caught up with the light around a turn and saw the stooping shape of Pelargos on ahead. Then they heard his voice, in a wild, exultant, incoherent yell of excitement.

They hastened on, for the light lessened once more. The passage opened into another; Pelargos was standing in a large but rather narrow chamber with high roof, the torch held high. Its spluttering ruddy flames lighted up everything. The three stood staring, silent.

From this chamber various passages led away into obscurity. At one end were piled a curious lot of objects—stools, crude stone images, a huge bronze tripod, a litter of old clothes and weapons, evidently left from ancient occupancy. But piled in the center of the place, filling the floor, were the treasures of pristine Rome, of the city and temples destroyed by the Gauls nearly a century ago.

It was a queer hodgepodge of intrinsically worthless objects, no doubt venerated relics of temples and shrines, and glorious eye-filling riches in massy gold and gems. Caskets and chests of bronze and wood and leather; vases, shields, votive offerings of ruddy metal, old-fashioned weapons and armor of the most glorious description.

Pelargos moved, went to one of the high leather sacks, and with an effort

broke the rotten draw-strings and pried apart the stiff leather folds. He scooped out a handful of gold ornaments and coins, and let them dribble back. He struck his knuckles against one of the tall golden vases. The actuality of it was stupefying.

"Well, here it is," he said hoarsely. "Loot of the Etruscan kings, loot of the Latin tribes, loot of the temples and treasury of Rome! Placed here and lost; those who hid it, killed by the Gauls!"

Drusilla approached a small but gloriously worked casket of gold and ivory. As though fascinated, she traced with her finger the letters worked on top and sides. A sudden low cry escaped her; she looked up, eyes dilated, awe and wonder in her face.

"Look! Look! Do you know what this is? Can you read? The books of the Cumean Sybil! The most sacred thing in all Rome, the prophecies which guided and guarded the city! They are supposed to have been laid away for consultation only in the greatest emergencies; no one has seen them for ages, except the priests—"

"And in reality they were put here and lost!" Pelargos broke in with a wild laugh. "Ha! There's Rome for you! No one dared admit they were lost, eh? Well, well, let's have another torch or two. Comrade, you and I will have to move out to the entrance whatever we want to take with us. We'll have to take all we want, for we may not get back here."

"I want this." Drusilla put her hand on the casket. "But, Pelargos! How can we hope to carry much of this treasure with us?"

"I'll answer that tonight," said Pelargos, his bald pate shining in the torch-light. "You know more about the relics of the gods of Rome than I do, lady. Pick out some of these things—sacred images and so forth. Probably these small caskets hold the most precious objects."

DRUSILLA began to examine the boxes and chests, as Ramnes moved them out.

"Everything's marked," she exclaimed. "See the leather tags on the armor? Oh—it can't be true, it can't!" She caught her breath, staring at a little casket of curious old bronze. "The sacred image that Aeneas brought from Troy! And that stone figure—the Minerva that fell from heaven! Those golden arms, the relics of the kings of Veii—"

Pelargos laughed again. "Plague take your images from heaven! I've seen 'em in Spain and Gaul, stones that fall from the sky with fire and noise. Just stones. Funny sort of gods, who have nothing better to do than bombard the earth with fiery images! Ramnes, here are weapons, armor, and the good gold coin that spells power. We'd better get what we want moved out to the entrance. We can't take too much; let Drusilla have the heavenly images to play with, and we'll stick to solid worth."

"Wait!" Drusilla intervened, breath coming quickly, and eyes alight. "I want for myself this little casket with the books of the Cumean Sybil; but wait! Do you realize what this means? The choice it offers to us?"

PELARGOS shook his head, frowning. Ramnes nodded, with a slight smile; he had been thinking of just this thing. Cool, unexcited by the scene, careless of the heaped metal, he had been weighing potential and actual values.

"To bargain with Rome, you mean?"

"Of course!" she cried. "Only the priests know these treasures are lost; they're supposed to have been saved from the Gauls and to remain hidden in the temples. The priests know. They've handed down descriptions, everything. And the priests are the most powerful men in Rome, remember!"

"Ha! I see!" burst out Pelargos. "Hand over this stuff, bargain, barter! We could have anything we asked. Eh? And then get our throats cut to stop our tongues."

"Right," said Ramnes calmly. "Who'd trust Rome? Not I. Rome would go to any lengths to get this stuff, true; and to any lengths to keep the people from knowing it had been lost. Would you trust Rome, Drusilla?"

The light died from her face. "No."

"Nor I," said Pelargos. "But I'll not hold you. Choose, then! If against Rome, be against her; if seeking some way to buy her friendship, seek it! But not I. The temples at Eryx will go wild to get some of these relics. The priests there will be more valuable to us than the priests of Rome. Drusilla, take what you like of all this pile, and go to Rome, if you wish. Here's your chance. The choice is yours."

"Right," said Ramnes gravely, looking at her. "I don't know yet just what Pelargos proposes at Eryx; but my choice is made. Yours is to make."

"Tonight, then, when your friend Lars arrives," said she, and turned away, cradling the little casket of gold and ivory in her arms.

"All right," said Pelargos briskly. "You hold a light, we'll work. At it, comrade! Two of these leather bags of gold and trinkets, to the outer entrance, and what other stuff we can find of most value."

They worked for a long while. To Ramnes, it was absurd to hope that they could carry away what was dragged out along the passage, yet Pelargos seemed cheerfully confident.

They broke off to explore the grotto's ancient approach, which ended in a blank wall of massive stones, the wall upon which had been laid the curses of Rome. Pelargos roared with laughter over the whole affair. Rome, hiding away here her choicest treasures and securely concealing them under mighty curses—only to lose them when those who knew the secret died! Even Veturis had been bound by his awe and superstition. But Ramnes said truly, Veturis had not been driven by all the devils of despair and lost hopes and an empty future.

"Here's such armor as you'll never see again," Pelargos exclaimed once. "Equip yourself! You came here a mere man, fugitive and battered; go forth a god, comrade!"

"Oh!" Drusilla examined the leather tag affixed to a glorious Etruscan helmet of bronze and gold. "Ramnes! Here's the armor of Porsena, king of Tusculum, a votive offering to Mars after he was killed! Take it, take it!"

Laughing, Ramnes obeyed; the massive armor was a bit large, even for him, but the spear that accompanied it brought a grunt of delight from his lips. A tempered bronze point, hard as steel, a heavy shank adorned with golden grips—a massive weapon, a thing of cruel weight but beautiful balance. Pelargos, decking himself out in fanciful helm and breastplate of Greek workmanship, smiled.

"And to think my little pellets of iron, my strip of leather and cord, would let death and daylight through your bronze at fifty feet! Here, take this shield," and he rolled out a small but exquisitely worked shield adorned with a Gorgon's head. "Not too heavy, and has a good grip. Well, how's the time going?"

THEY sought the daylight, and were amazed to find the afternoon nearly gone and the sun at the western hills. They had even forgotten to eat, and laugh-



"I want for myself this little casket. . . . Only the priests know that these treasures are lost!"

ingly made amends. When Ramnes strode off to get the horses, Pelargos nudged Drusilla and pointed.

"Look, lady! There's Hercules come back to earth again; did you ever see a man more fitted to be a god? Not Hannibal himself, I tell you!"

Her blue eyes dwelt upon the glittering armed figure, whose splendid proportions and lithe power seemed so incredible.

"What a Roman he would make!" she breathed, half regretfully.

Pelargos sniffed.

"What a god he would make, you mean! And by Hercules, that's what

I'll make of him! He's only half awake to life and power and his own possibilities; one good bleeding, and you'll see a different person there, a man greater than other men, emerging from youth and bitterness. He's wise, cool—all he needs is to feel and know himself. You should have seen him down that centurion, all in a minute. Give him his chance, now, and there'll be one of the old heroes come to life!"

They rode back to the ruins of the villa, Pelargos jingling gold and Drusilla with the casket in her arms; but Ramnes found a fierce delight in the great spear, massive



as himself, made as though for his strong hands.

The slaves and servants stared amazedly. Drusilla assigned them a cottage close to her own, one of the outbuildings which had escaped the flames.

"I have writing to do," she said, smiling. "Caius, my freedman, is an excellent scribe. Make yourselves comfortable, and I'll get you to witness some papers when we're through. No sign of your friend Lars, so far. We'll be warned if he or anyone else comes."

Half an hour later a slave summoned them to her cottage. They were shaved and bathed, rested and at ease. They found her working with the freedman, at a table heaped with seals and writing-materials.

"Will you witness these?" she said, pointing to a heap of papers. "If you can't write, Pelargos, make your mark. These are letters of freedom for all my slaves."

"What?" exclaimed Ramnes. "Why are you freeing them?"

"I'm gambling," she said, smiling, looking into his eyes. "The die is cast. I'm gambling with destiny—and you two. I'll have no use for these slaves in Eryx."

So she announced her decision.

CHAPTER X

AN hour after sunset, when they were sitting down to dinner in the cottage, came Lars Masena. A shepherd had come in posthaste with word of a single horseman, so they were ready, with a place set at the table and a couch for him.

The change in Lars, of which Ramnes had previously been aware, was now even

more pronounced. He was assured, confident, radiant; at first entrance he flung Pelargos one quick nod, one gesture, as though to announce that his mysterious errand had been more than successful. Drusilla greeted him with an appraising quality beneath her cool dignity, but speedily thawed to him. He seemed, indeed, to be consumed by a laughing, eager exultation.

"What news?" demanded Ramnes.

"Oh, the best!" Lars rejoined, beaming. "That is, if you don't linger about here. I hear Mancinus has proclaimed a huge reward for your head—a traitor to Rome and so forth. What about the treasure?"

"Found and ready," exclaimed Pelargos.

Drusilla regarded Lars with a smile.

"I'm told that you're something of an expert with elephants. You should visit the one at Heracles, not far from here—the Monster of Heracles, he's called."

PELARGOS exploded in laughter, and Lars grinned.

"I've just come from there," he said. "Your Monster is an old bull, a big one, flabby with lack of exercise; he was overjoyed to see me."

"What?" said Drusilla. "You talk as though he were an old friend!"

"Lady, he nearly danced for joy when I spoke to him in Carthaginian! He had not forgotten his youthful training—he was captured by the Romans, you know. When I left, he trumpeted after me. The priests were dumfounded. I dropped in as a chance traveler, and departed as an honored magician."

"And can you get him?" demanded Pelargos.

"Easily. He's chained to a huge tree in the temple grove—a long chain. I have only to knock out a staple, and he's free. They'll never know he's gone, till next morning."

"And will probably assign it to the doing of the gods!" Pelargos laughed loudly, caught the look of Drusilla, and leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "All right, all right! Here, comrades, is the game. Tomorrow Lars goes back to Heracles; he steals the elephant and gets here in an hour or so after dark."

"Less," broke in Lars Masena. "He'll travel fast, faster than horses."

"And picks up the load of gold. Ha! You see the point now?" exclaimed Pelargos triumphantly. "You see the mill-race of destiny? But only a part. With

that elephant and our horses, we get off, travel all night, get past Asculum before morning, and have a clear road to the sea! Hide by daylight, travel by night. On to Eryx, and the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy!"

Ramnes stared admiringly, as everything suddenly dovetailed and came clear—or at least enough to give him an inkling of the slow plotting, and why Pelargos had wanted to make sure of details.

"What prophecy?" he demanded.

"Mine." Pelargos grinned. "Remember that priest of Hercules at Ariminum? The one to whom I gave half my plunder, and sent to Eryx? Those priests, comrade, are smart men, and for gold they'll do much. I told him I was one of Hannibal's captains and was coming to Eryx, with the god Hercules. You see, there actually was some old prophecy that Hercules would return to life and show up in Eryx. Now, by this time, it'll be spread all over the city. No one will know much about ancient prophecies except the priests, and they'll embroider it to suit the cloth. Remember, Eryx is worried over the Roman power; remember, we've learned that Mancinus expects to gobble Eryx! The prophecy is all set, be sure of that. When Hercules shows up on an elephant—"

Ramnes, who had listened with gathering anger, broke in abruptly:

"Enough of this blasphemy! I'll have no part in it. Shame on you for assuming that I'd lend myself to such a rascally imposition!"

"**W**AIT, my noble Roman, wait!" cried Pelargos. "You don't understand! I'm giving you Eryx—the city, its fleet, its territories! I'm making you king, tyrant, dictator, judge, anything you want to call yourself—ruler of Eryx!"

"Are you insane?" demanded Ramnes sternly.

"No. Lars will back up all I say. Here's a city of thirty thousand souls, ruled by a council of elders, and badly ruled; the royal family died out some generations back and the city became a republic, to its sorrow. What happens? In time of crisis, with the hand of Rome reaching out to grab everything, the god Hercules appears riding on an elephant. The prophecies have come true!"

"I'll have none of it!" snapped Ramnes. "I'll not stoop to such pretense!"

"You don't have to do anything; just take what's given you. The more you

deny being a god, the more firmly they'll believe you are one. You'll come with gold in your hand—ha! Trust the priests to do the rest! Offer the city only one thing; help against Rome. Be their leader. Send to Hannibal offering alliance and help. He'll make no campaign until spring; then Rome will make a supreme effort, and either crush him or be crushed. Here's the end of the rainbow I showed you on the other side the Alps, Ramnes!"

DRUSILLA turned, and her face was radiant.

"Oh, Ramnes! It's as you said only this morning—the chance to build, to create, to effect something great!"

So it was, indeed; her words shook him, and his eyes were opened to the truth. Pretense? Not at all. He need pretend nothing.

Lars squinted at him across the table, and spoke.

"You're the man for it, the man to do it, Ramnes! Come in the likeness of a god; then let your actions speak for you. Eryx is ripe to be plucked. What's more, the Friends of Hercules will back you up. I'll guarantee that five thousand Sabines will be there in three weeks, to fight against Rome! If you don't pluck the ripe apple, Mancinus will."

"You can," said Drusilla softly. "You'll not lose the chance, comrade?"

The word burned joyously in his brain as he stared at her, at the others. Realization came to him. Power! He, the gawky barbarian youth, suddenly caught and rushed down the millrace of destiny, as Pelargos expressed it; shoved into power—could he do it? Could he play such a game?

"By the gods!" he exclaimed slowly. His features firmed, settled into sudden exultant strength. "It's incredible; yet—ah, what a glorious incredibility! Yes, I see it now, what it means, what it might be! Right, Pelargos!" He looked at Drusilla, and laughed eagerly. "And you'll help?"

"If I can, yes. I can see the future, there in Eryx!"

"Then it's settled. But why delay?" The gaze of Ramnes, now all ablaze, struck out at Pelargos. "Why not go now, tonight?"

The Stork palmed his bald head, anxiously.

"We must risk delay. If Lars went now, he'd not get here till after midnight with the elephant. Between here and Asculum, seventy miles, all is danger;

we couldn't get past Asculum by dawn, and an elephant is no easy thing to hide. With an early start tomorrow night, we can do it. At least, Lars and I can do it with the elephant; you and Drusilla follow on horseback, and we'll wait for you next day beyond Asculum. Remember, that beast can go like the wind! Then, past Asculum, we're practically out of danger."

"Seventy miles in a night, loaded with gold and two men?" queried Ramnes skeptically.

Lars wrinkled up his face. "I think so; if not, I know a place near Asculum where we'd be safe. But near here or Reate, none. Thank the gods, we're between Reate and Asculum, and have only the one city to pass! That elephant, remember, must be out of this whole district between sunset and sunrise. It'll be a pinch, but we can do it or kill the old bull in the attempt!"

"Very well; then we risk delay." Ramnes met the gaze of Pelargos, and laughed aloud. "You crafty schemer! That glorious armor, the gold, the relics of the gods—yes, we should be welcome enough in Eryx, if things are as you say! We'll find Romans there?"

"Romans are everywhere. Mancinus has spies there," said Pelargos, a question in his eyes.

"Then the first thing to do is to seize every one of them," said Ramnes thoughtfully.

The face of Pelargos cleared. He exchanged a glance with Lars, who smiled; Drusilla caught the look, and her eyes warmed; she lifted her goblet, and spilled a few drops of the wine.

"To the gods!" she exclaimed. "To all the gods—and may the false become the true!"

"There," said Pelargos, "is a toast I can drink with all my heart!"

POWER! Rather, the opportunity of striking a blow for freedom, for himself, for them all; a blow such as Rome would remember, a blow for the free people of the world!

His throbbing thoughts stirred Ramnes out of the cottage that night, when the others were asleep, out under the stars. He paced up and down, cloak-wrapped against the night chill, mapping in his brain a thousand things that might be done—if Eryx willed! Within a few hours, he had changed and grown into a different person, as though he had been ripening for this moment.

He was aware of a dark figure, and heard her voice.

"Not sleeping?"

"Planning," said he, falling into step with her. "The world has suddenly become rich and glorious. Ah, if we were in Eryx now!"

"What would you seek to do, if we were?"

"Please you," he said softly. She made no answer for a while, then spoke as she turned away.

"That," she said, "is possible. Good-night, comrade!"

He slept on the promise of those words.

NOON of next day saw Lars Masena off; he had seen the treasure, he knew where to meet them that evening. The winter days were short, the nights long, and he was confident that all would go as planned.

Power! The thought drove unceasingly at Ramnes; not that he cared a snap about power for itself, but for the sake of achievement. It obsessed him that afternoon, as in company with Pelargos he took the horses and heavy armor to the thicket in front of the cave opening, and left them there against the night. The horses tethered, he took seat on a fallen tree and watched Pelargos working with his sling.

"The whole thing seems impossible," he said abruptly. "It's a grand dream to make a song in the heart, but it takes a lot of doing."

"That's life, if you'd live it like a god," said the bald man. "The weakling who's afraid to fight, claims the world owes him a living and tries to sneak it. The strong man goes through defeat and misery, heartbreak, treachery; but goes through. Sometimes."

"Go over to Greece and set up as a philosopher," Ramnes said with asperity. "What do you know of failure and heartbreak, you who last night smoothed out the future with honeyed words? According to your reckoning, we have only to walk ahead to triumph."

"I lied," the other said simply. "This moment, comrade, I'm facing perplexity; I'm at a loss, blocked, baffled! I've been so eager about the other details, that I've missed the keynote of the whole affair. I tried so hard to make you and Drusilla see success, that I left the most important detail to chance—and, confound it, I see no way!"

Ramnes stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Remember, I spoke of your contribution? A task, which I didn't envy you?"

"Oh! I remember you mentioned it. Just what is the task?"

"Getting hold of the dagger of Eryx. The one Mancinus has. Croton told you of it. The thing isn't absurd, comrade; it actually works."

Ramnes nodded. "I believe it. Not hard to figure out how it works, either. Why does it matter to us?"

Pelargos surveyed him, lips pursed, eyes troubled.

"Has it occurred to you that Eryx might be slow to accept a new ruler?"

"Why, plague take it, that's what worries me!" burst out Ramnes. "It just doesn't make sense. Priests or not, gods or not, the idea is folly! It sounds good, but lacks in all practical, prosaic value. A handful of gold won't buy the rule of a city; nor will mere superstition conquer reality."

"I know," said the other, and sighed. "Here's the nub of the whole thing, comrade. The ancient prophecy—the real one, not my hocus-pocus—stated that Hercules would come to Eryx bringing back the dagger with him. Remember, it was a gift from Minerva. She and Hercules are the twin divinities of the city. It was the symbol of sovereignty. It was preserved in a temple in Reate until Mancinus seized it."

RAMNES frowned. "You're apparently serious—"

"By Hercules, I am serious!" exclaimed Pelargos, fervently. "That dagger's the key to everything! I've racked my brains trying to think up some way of getting it, and I'm stumped. All I can suggest is that you go into Reate tonight with Drusilla, after we get off, and try your luck. It never leaves Mancinus night or day, they say; and he lives in the city, not in the camp."

"So you expect me to take such an insane risk, for a dagger?"

"You and she both." Pelargos wore a sulky expression, as though the problem had so utterly baffled him that he was ready to snarl at anyone. "Not for a dagger, but for Eryx! I tell you, it's the key to triumph! The priests there know all about it, doubtless know the secret of its magic; there's no other in the world like it."

Ramnes spat out an oath. "If the cursed thing means so much in Eryx, why doesn't Mancinus plan to make use of it there?" he demanded.

"He does, he does!" cried Pelargos in exasperation. "He means to seize Eryx with its help! There's no secret about it; he knows its value to him. Roman commissioners were here last week. He's arranged everything with them. Once master of Eryx, he's to have full prætor's rank. The new consuls, just elected, have promised him a free hand so long as he sends treasure and slaves and above all, cavalry, to Rome!"

"Then it seems your plans should have begun with this dagger, instead of ending with it. Filled with some subtle poison or some virulent drug, that smears the point on touching a secret spring, eh?"

"Evidently you don't credit the magic of the gods?"

"Bah! No more than you. Well, if I must, I must! Send Drusilla away with Lars. You stay, and lend a hand. We'll get the cursed thing somehow."

"Agreed. Send her out of danger, eh?" The countenance of Pelargos cleared. "Very well. That'll mean delay; we may have to spend most of the night getting at Mancinus."

"She said two Roman senators had been here," Ramnes said gloomily. "She appealed to them and they politely laughed at her. Evidently they were preparing to sell her out all the time, making an agreement with Mancinus; if it's true that the state is taking over all her property, that she's to be a ward—eh? What's wrong?"

"Everything," muttered Pelargos.

He was staring past Ramnes, who turned and came to his feet. Instead of three horses, there were now four. A fourth had come up while they talked, unobserved, and joined the others, and was standing there; something queerly shapeless clung to his saddle, and, as they hastily approached, dripped heavy goutts of blood. A man, horribly gashed by swords, was clinging there senseless.

"Her freedman Caius!" cried Ramnes. "Quick! Something's happened!"

HASTILY Pelargos helped him get the dying freedman from the saddle. His eyes opened, he looked at them, he spoke faintly.

"Just after—you left. Mancinus. A dozen soldiers. Killed our men—"

His head lolled over, he sighed, and it was his last breath. Ramnes leaped up, but Pelargos caught his arm, looked into his eyes.

"Careful! Quickest to leap, first to stumble, as the saying goes. Three miles



The sword of Ramnes slashed . . . from the man burst a frightful scream, as his arm fell off.

to ride." His swift gaze flicked at the trees, the vale, the hills. "I can cut straight across. You ride around; take armor and spear. I'll help you with it."

Ramnes, his brain on fire, turned and hurled himself at the armor.

"Use your head, now," said Pelargos, helping with the stiff ancient fastenings. "You're the shock troops, heavy-armed; go straight in. Trust me to be somewhere. Here's Rome, remember! Meet Rome squarely, comrade. The other fellow always dies first, if you're quick enough; first blow best."

Thought of Drusilla, caught helpless, her men cut down, burned in the brain

of Ramnes. Nothing else mattered. The sun was westering, the afternoon well gone. Still silent, grimly silent, he lifted the tremendous weight of the armor into the saddle with his body. Shield gripped on left arm, he took the murderous spear Pelargos handed him, turned the horse, and rode off, without a word.

CHAPTER XI

MANCINUS had no lictors now, no marks of office, no toga. Like the others, he was in armor, he had come on a brisk and ruthless business, and here



he was at his best; in the role of soldier, he excelled.

His dozen companions were well chosen. Two were Romans, officers of the fifth legion detached on Umbrian duty; dour veterans, impassive and cold men, very efficient in all they did. The remainder were officers from the cavalry training-school, Latins of the southern tribes who hated all Sabines on principle. Four of them stood guard over the assembled slaves and servants, the others were grouped about Mancinus.

Armed with light javelins and swords, the party had wasted no time coming here. The shepherds who attempted to

delay them were killed without mercy; to bring home the lesson, a few of the freedmen here, exulting in their new liberty, were cut down before the eyes of Drusilla. The others were cowed and terrified. She, standing before the group, slim and straight and shaken by helpless anger, eyed Mancinus with scorn; the two Romans stood at her elbows, one of them bleeding at the mouth. When they seized her, Drusilla had struck this man with her distaff, which gained her little good.

Mancinus was seated on a stool, arrogantly eying her and the group of slaves; they were in the open, out be-

fore the cottage, and a glorious golden light from the approaching sunset flooded the scene. The *proprætor* was in high good humor. Overlaid by smiling suavity, his lean forceful features were eloquent of character and command. He made no comment, showed no resentment, as Drusilla deliberately lashed the two Roman officers and then the others with chill angered words.

"You, disgrace to the name of Rome, who dare lay hands on me! On me, whose father died with the legions! And you, despicable fawning Latins, who cringe at the beck and call of your conquerors, who flatter this evil man—how dare you stand there even looking at me? If we were in Rome now, the pack of you would be driven to the city gates by lictors. Aye, including you, Mancinus, who shame an honorable name!"

MANCINUS nodded, smiling, his hot eyes roving up and down her figure.

"For the last time, Drusilla, for the last time, make the most of your tongue," crackled his voice. Beneath its tolerant good-humor burned sarcasm and vindictive resentment, and the flame of desire.

"You're a most intolerable sort of woman," he went on, undershot jaw resting cupped in his hand, gaze devouring her. "Your bitter pride needs chastening. You have beauty, and you don't know how to use it."

"No; a beast doesn't appreciate virtue," she flashed at him. "He hates it and fears it."

"Your old-fashioned qualities," and his sarcasm deepened, "are admirable, but out of place in the world today, Drusilla. You've made yourself objectionable with your insensate pride, your inability to view two sides of a question. Beautiful as you are, you must be brought to hand."

"Scorned and despised by every honest Roman, you now return prating fine words where you were driven out in shame when my father lived," she said.

Mancinus colored, and straightened. He took a scroll from his pouch.

"By this decree of the commissioners appointed by the senate for Umbria," he said, "you are adjudged dangerous to the state, because your authority and position are used to breed discontent and to countenance hostility to the republic. Therefore your estates are taken by the state to be held in trust; you yourself are appointed a ward of the republic, until your marriage to a solid and respectable Roman citizen."

"Meaning perhaps yourself, and the dagger you stole from the Reate temple," she said bitterly, as he finished. "Oh, I know all about your precious plans! And those two senators you bribed. I think you have the most evil heart of any man who ever lived, Mancinus."

His eyes narrowed upon her.

"Too bad I didn't suspect that rascally horse-doctor Croton was waiting to betray me," he rejoined. "So he told you a lot, did he? And all true, Drusilla. All true! You've riddled me with your scorn and contempt, but for the last time. Now the gods have given you into my hands."

"The gods!" she said hotly. "You mean, all the powers of evil!"

He freed the long poniard from its sheath, and turned it over in his hand, as though the sight of it were answer enough.

"The gift of Minerva," he observed, with a thin, cruel smile as he saw the horror leap in her eyes. "A pretty thing, this divine bit of metal!"

A magnificent thing, rather; the blade longer than ordinary, of ancient fluted bronze, not smooth but almost quadrangular in shape, exquisitely chiseled and worked. The hilt, too, was longer and larger than any dagger hilt; an enormous, rough, massy lump of gold in which were set bits of silver as though to help the grip. As a weapon, it was huge and out of all proportion, but as a gift from the gods, it looked the part.

Mancinus thumbed the needle-point, smiling and watching her; but his men eyed the thing askance, with ugly side-long looks, for it roused their superstition and hatred. It was abnormal, and normal men, whether good or bad, detest all abnormal things and creatures.

RISING suddenly, Mancinus lost his smile; at his gesture, the two Romans seized Drusilla by the arms; she stood erect and unafraid as he approached, her eyes scornful and contemptuous, but her face very pale.

"Aye, Drusilla, this disdainful pride needs a lesson. I'll cure you of it, in the sight of all men," he said, and thrust forth a hand. Catching her gown at the neck, he ripped it open. She did not move, but the blaze in her eyes was dreadful to see. He thrust the dagger at her, so that the point touched her white bosom.

"You'll pay for your taunts and revilings," he said, a snarl in his voice. "I love you and hate you at once! By the power which this weapon of the gods

lends me, I'll make you come crawling to my feet, make your proud name a by-word for shame, take you to Rome and exhibit you there for what you are—"

The dagger moved slightly. A tiny red scratch appeared on her white skin; a drop of blood gathered and dripped. She said nothing, made no motion, but the look in her eyes seemed to madden him. A harsh peal of laughter escaped him, and he sheathed the weapon.

"Let the gods decide! Loose her, my friends, loose her." He gestured to the two Romans, who stepped away. She gathered the rent gown together in one hand, then remained unmoving, horror and loathing in her gaze as she watched Mancinus. He surveyed her with exultant malice.

"Mine, do you hear? Mine!" he exclaimed. "Wife, aye; as soon as we get to the city—and slave as well! Here, start your duties aright by carrying this gift of the gods for me."

He slipped off his shoulder the gold-studded leather baldric to which the sheath of the dagger was affixed. Coming to her, laughing, he put it over her head, over one shoulder, so that the dagger hung at her thigh. Her hand went to it convulsively, but he gripped her wrist, caught her knotted hair in the other hand, pressed his lips to hers, and stared into her face with vindictive triumph.

"Mine!" he repeated. She flinched not, moved not; nor, being in his grip, could she. Protesting voices from the servants and slaves made him look up.

"Friends, you might be gathering up these rascals; string them on ropes and we'll march them back with us. The women will come in handy at Rome, now that the strength of every legion is raised to five thousand foot and five hundred horse! Our ancestors stole Sabine women; we'll send Sabine women as slaves to serve the army. Eh, my sweet one?"

He kissed Drusilla again; then, as he looked into her eyes, started slightly.

"It works! The charm works already!" he exclaimed. Stepping back, he struck her across the face, twice, with his open hand, while groans and cries of horror came from the watching slaves and servants. "Take that for your lesson of servility, your first lesson!" broke out his voice, heavy with the hatred in his heart.

At the savage words and action, one of the slaves burst into a cry.

"The gods punish you! May they punish you as you deserve!"



Mancinus swung around. "So? You don't know your master yet, eh? For that, you'll be flogged to death and drawn through the camp at the tail of a mule, this night! You dogs will learn that when you speak to a Roman—"

A cry checked him, a startled word, an exclamation of amazement.

"Mancinus! Look! Who's this?"

The two Romans, beside him, growled and stared. The group of Latins stared. The slaves stared. Even the dozen horses, clumped at one side, lifted heads and pricked their ears forward. But Drusilla stared not; she looked at Mancinus, her eyes lackluster and dulled.

IN upon them Ramnes was riding, slowing his horse, drawing rein as his gaze flitted over them all and touched upon the sprawled corpses, and upon the figure of Drusilla with one hand clutching the gown at her throat. No one knew him, by reason of the wide Etruscan helmet with the bronze nose-bar that came down to his lips.

"Give him a club and lionskin, instead of that spear, and I'd call him Hercules!" said one officer, with a shaky laugh.

"A god! Some god has come!" cried out the slaves with a burst of voices. "Rescue!"

"No such armor as that in the past century and more," said one of the Romans.

Ramnes halted his horse. Carefully he dismounted; the weight of this armor made him topheavy in the saddle, and he needed to be sure of himself. Once on his feet, he lifted the spear and cried out:

"Drusilla! Not hurt?"

A wild shout burst from Mancinus.

"That rascal of a Roman! Here's our man, friends—at him, at him!"

Snatching a javelin, he hurled it, lightning swift. Ramnes, with the deft motion that every schoolboy knew, caught the cast on his shield. A clang, and the javelin slithered off as though it refused to touch that ruddy armor of golden bronze, shimmering in the sunset.

"A god!" cried the slaves. "Ramnes! Lord Ramnes! A god!"

"Mancinus the traitor, rather!" shouted the Roman leader. "At him, everyone!"

"You first, foul cousin," retorted Ramnes, and hurled the great spear.

Mancinus, by a miracle of agility, avoided it; but it went through the Roman next him, through corselet and body and backpiece.

Ramnes instantly regretted his folly in letting the weapon go, but too late. He drew his sword and threw up his shield. They were coming in at him from all directions with javelin and sword. His brain awakened. Upon the flashing moment drove the old maxims of his father: When overpowered, attack! Always attack with everything!

So, as they ringed him in, he suddenly sprang at them, a towering, hurtling figure of ferocity, his face convulsed, a yell on his lips. He crashed bodily into one of the Latins. Carrying all that bronze weight, the breast-to-breast body-blow taught by old Marcus Mancinus was terrific. The Latin gasped and staggered. The sword of Ramnes slashed at his throat. Another Latin plunged in full tilt, driving with his javelin; it shivered on the bronze corselet, and from the man burst a frightful scream as his arm fell off, lopped near the shoulder, and the blood spurted in air.

Ramnes was aside, swooping, clutching. He got his great beam of a spear, jerked it clear, leaped away.

Swords clanged; javelins drove in. The ancient bronze armor rang like a bell to the impacts, but yielded not. An opening came; Ramnes leaped, drove with that massive spear, put all his force in the thrust. It went through a gay gold-adorned mailcoat like paper, and the Latin in the mailcoat cried out upon death. A desperate leap aside, and Ramnes was clear.

CLEAR, only to find the second Roman upon him, sword hewing. The shield saved him from that deadly stroke, the helmet saved him from another. His spear thrust and went through the Roman's thigh. The man staggered back.

Sword ready, Ramnes was upon him, beating his weapon away with the shield, slashing with deadly blade for the throat. The blow went home.

Away again and into them! They shrank not, but met him squarely. Here was Mancinus, sword out; he ducked the mighty spear, but the gold-bossed shaft of it struck him across the eyes and sent him rolling. A javelin flashing for the back—one leap, and Ramnes was away, his open back against a great tree-trunk.

And, suddenly, he was done. Even his giant strength had been sapped and exhausted by those terrific efforts, carrying all the enormous weight of bronze. His lungs burned, his knees were failing. A javelin sang in. He could not lift shield to avoid it, and it struck full on his breastplate, but could not pierce the bronze.

The two Romans were dead, and two of the Latins; the officer with the lopped arm was down, and dying. Mancinus, blood on his face, was ordering the others. They ringed him in; they had him now, and knew it. For the legs, went the word. For the legs! Pin him to the tree with a javelin through the legs, and finish him!

THERE came a queer, sickening *plop*; the foremost officer dropped weapons, screamed, and put both hands to his face, whence blood was spurting. Another Latin turned to him in astonishment, only to fling out his arms and pitch forward on his face. The others fell back, all astare. Ramnes, suddenly plucking up hope, strode out and killed the screaming officer with a spear-thrust, and with an angry oath sent the reddened spear hurtling at Mancinus. The latter, with a frantic leap, avoided the cast—so narrowly that it caught in a joint of his armor and ripped it away, and jerked him off his feet.

A third Latin uttered a terrible cry, with a clang of metal on metal. His eyes rolled, his tongue protruded; he clapped both hands to his breast. Something had struck his corselet and passed on through into his body. He rocked on his heels, and fell.

The shrill, long yell of Pelargos quivered across the sunset. They saw him now, that unearthly tall figure like something inhuman as he stood poised. A wild cry, and the four remaining Latins went plunging for the horses, dragging the reeling Mancinus with them.

As they came to the horses, one of the four pitched over and over, like a rabbit

struck by an arrow in mid-leap. The others climbed into the saddle, turned the horses. Once again, the figure of Pelargos uncoiled, and invisible death sang down the air. One of the riders fell over sideways, but his foot held fast and he was dragged for a long way as the horse galloped.

Again Pelargos uncoiled and his arms flew forth. Two men, with Mancinus between them; the Roman swayed in the saddle, bent far forward, then straightened again and kept his seat. The horses pounded on full speed, three men in saddle, one dragging.

Ramnes dropped his shield, put off the heavy helmet, and strode to the group of slaves around Drusilla. Their exultation had died; they opened, in silence and affright, to let him reach her. He stopped dead, and caught his breath.

"Drusilla! Don't you know me?"

She smiled. Her vacant eyes rested on him.

"Of course!" she said. "Of course. You're Ramnes, my dear friend!"

The group of slaves and servants shook with swift relief, then froze again at sight of Ramnes' face. He advanced, caught her arm, peered into her eyes.

"By the gods, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, nothing at all, dear Ramnes!" she rejoined. "What was all the noise about? I had a queer dream, but I forget what it was."

He drew back, staring at the enormous sheathed poniard. One of the women came forward, timidly opened the torn robe of Drusilla, who stood docile and unprotesting, and showed the scratch.

"Lord, he did it, and with this weapon that he put on her; he said he was making a slave of her."

A GROAN burst from Ramnes. The dagger of Eryx—there was damnable truth in the legend, as Pelargos had said! He looked at Drusilla, then at the slaves around, with terrible eyes.

"If any of those officers are still alive, kill them," he rasped. The group scattered.

Pelargos came striding up, blithely.

"Ha, comrade! Well fought; I showed up just in time. That rascal Mancinus must have special protection from somewhere; I missed him twice, and got him the third time, but it was too far for full effect. Not that he'll have any joy of the hurt—hello! Hello! What's wrong?"

He checked himself. Ramnes looked up, biting his lip, face livid, and pointed

to the weapon. He reached out and took it from Drusilla's shoulder, and thrust it at Pelargos.

"There's your damned dagger. He scratched her with it. Before I got here."

Pelargos looked at him, looked at Drusilla, then turned and went to the servants. His voice rose at them.

"Leave us three horses. Take the rest, take what you like, and scatter. At once! In a few hours there'll be cavalry here to kill every living thing in sight. Scatter! Your mistress goes with us. We'll take her to safety. Clear out, pass the word to any others, and be off!"

He came back to the side of Ramnes and stood looking at Drusilla.

"Lady, do you want to go with us?" he asked.

"Of course," she rejoined. "I'll do whatever you say, dear Pelargos."

Ramnes shivered, stifled a growl of oaths, and turned away from her. The sunset was passing into twilight, the first stars were in the greenish eastern sky.

"Get us horses. Your helmet and spear," said Pelargos in a hoarse voice.

WHEN Ramnes returned, leading the horses, Pelargos was talking with Drusilla. He held out the dagger and baldric.

"Throw away the spear; it's served its use. Take this instead. The damned thing has a queer poise; in the hands of a Hercules like yourself, it'll be a terrible weapon. Well, what are you standing there gawking for? Did you get a taste of the dagger, too?"

With an effort, Ramnes broke the shackles of horror that gripped him.

"I don't know. This—this is too awful for words, Pelargos. To think of her as she was, and as she is now—"

"Well, make the best of it," said Pelargos roughly. "What was I saying to you today? Heartbreak and horror and despair; a man must come through these things, if he's a man. They hit all of us sometime. Come on! Fight through! Maybe this spell or poison will wear off in a few days."

"You know better," said Ramnes, and Pelargos swore.

"Yes, I know better. Apparently it hasn't worn off those fellows in Reate. But she's not dead nor hurt, at least. She's not lost her wits. She's just lost her will-power, it seems. Ah! I'd give my left hand if that last bullet of mine had just gone twice as hard! It went straight enough, but it lacked killing

force. Look here, comrade! I'll get some food and wine; she was to have it ready for us, remember. I'll find it. You take her along to where the other horses are, where Lars is coming. Maybe Lars will know something about this deviltry. He may have some suggestion. We'll get to Eryx—who knows? By that time, she may be herself again. Fight! The time to fight is when the hurt's the worst."

Ramnes nodded. He was himself again, but the hurt was deep.

Deep, and unutterably stunning. For the first time, the wild and furious exhilaration of battle had seized him, carried him away. Pitted against picked officers, a dozen to one, he had tasted the savage wine of victory—his own prowess supreme, his skill and agility and brute strength flowing in a superhuman stream. All the fighting through the Alps had not been like this, nor left this tremendous realization of supremacy.

But now, now! It had flowed out of him in a minute at the touch of bitter grief. For Drusilla was like a child. She rode with him through the gathering darkness, talked, laughed and seemed herself, yet could make no effort of will, could concentrate on nothing, did precisely as she was told. He even tested her with his sword, and she would have slashed her arm had he not stopped her. To think of her, thus, and in the power of Mancinus who had sworn to shame her before the world, made his brain crawl with horror.

But now she was with him. This thought steadied him; she was a child, and he had her in trust. Rome, Rome! Hatred mounted again in him like a consuming flame. She had been treated as his own father had been treated. Not by Mancinus alone, but by Rome, the devouring wolf. Suddenly, as he rode, he recollected the ivory and gold casket she had taken for herself. He drew rein, turned her around, and they went back and met Pelargos as he was setting forth. He had, it seemed, dug his precious iron bullets from the corpses.

"Get the casket," said Ramnes, "and get a pot of fire from the hearth, to signal Lars."

The three of them rode, at last, to the thicket before the cavern entrance. There Ramnes lit a torch and plunged into the depths of the grotto once more.

Back in the treasure-room, he looked about, and his eye lit on the small, curious little old casket of bronze; the sacred image of Aeneas, she had said. With a



grim smile he plucked it up and went back to rejoin the others. Hatred, indeed! With this, he would take such a vengeance as would make the priests, the true lords of Rome, squirm bitterly!

They kindled a small fire. Drusilla ate, drank, wrapped up against the chill night, compliant with every suggestion, venturing no will of her own; until, of a sudden, a huge monstrous shape upheaved against the stars, came crashing in among the trees, and the voice of Lars Masena reached them in exultant greeting.

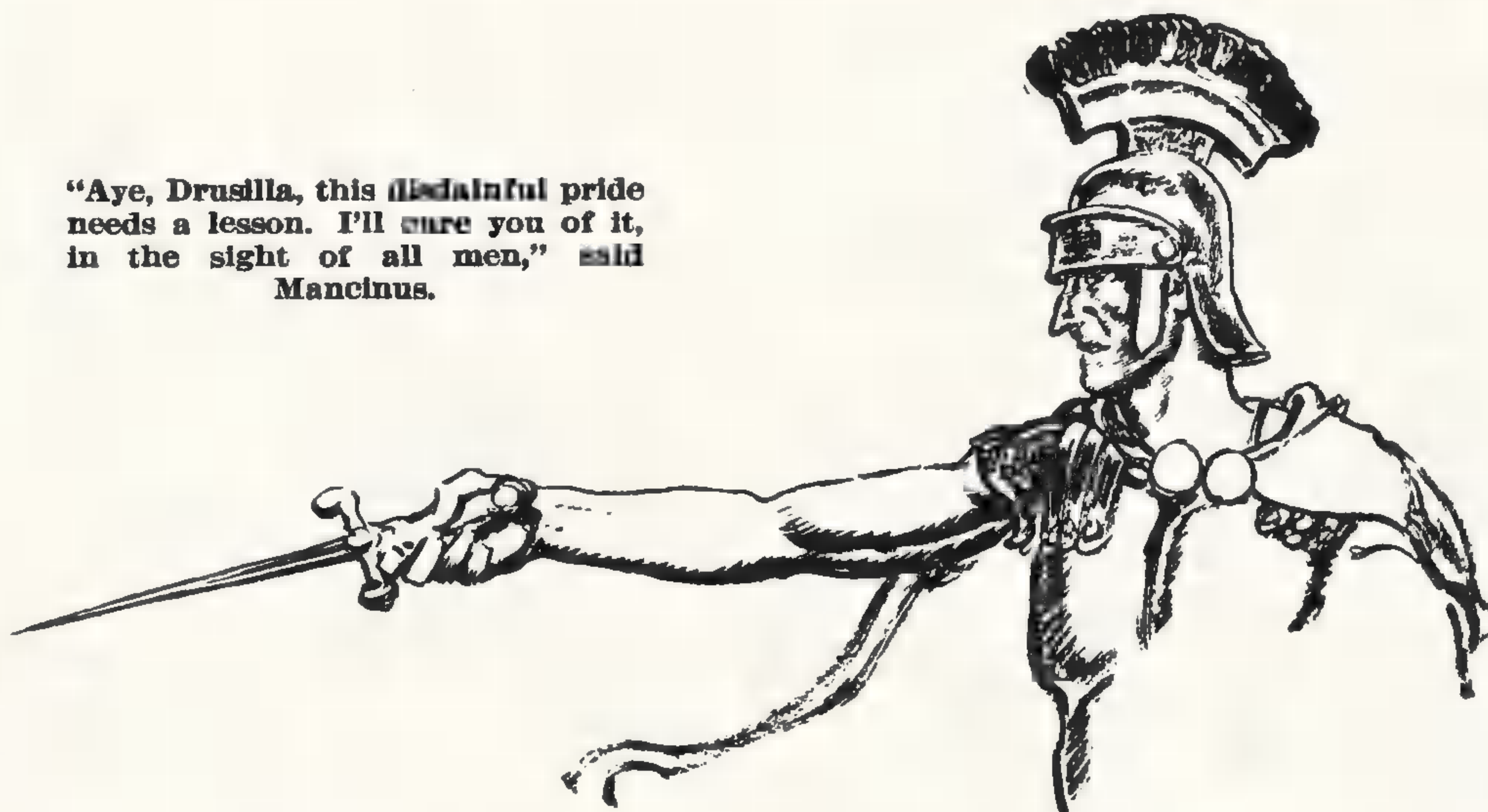
CHAPTER XII

AFTER all, Asculum proved an impossibility, due to the winding hill roads.

Pushing the horses hard in the wake of the vanished elephant, Ramnes and Pelargos kept on, hour after hour, riding silent and oppressed. In the cold clear grayness of the mountain dawn, a figure appeared on the road ahead. It was Lars, waiting and watching for them, welcoming them with acute relief as they dismounted.

"All well," he said. "The elephant? In a valley a few hundred yards off the road; there's the cart-track to the farm. Safe? Aye. An outpost of the Friends of Hercules; the farmer's one of us. The Lady Drusilla is asleep in the house. We must wait here till tomorrow night,"

"Aye, Drusilla, this disdainful pride needs a lesson. I'll cure you of it, in the sight of all men," said Mancinus.



"Why?" grated Ramnes, who was in a savage mood.

"Because the big bull has not traveled for years; his feet are tender. He's quite tame and handles like a child, but I dare not push him too far. We're only five miles from Asculum. Once past, we're beyond actual Roman territory. I'll get past tomorrow night; there are mountain trails that go around the city. You go on tomorrow, and we'll overtake you in the course of the next morning, and head straight on for Eryx."

"Very well. We'll rest here till noon. Have your friend get someone here to take a message to Rome."

"Rome?" Pelargos blinked at him.

"Yes, Rome! A letter and a box. He'll be highly paid. No danger. Get some sleep first, then I'll write the letter."

The morning was half gone when Ramnes awakened. The farm folk were kindly, hospitable, greatly in awe of the elephant and the guests. Ramnes, with sheepskin and reed pen and fresh bullock's blood, wrote his letter and then read it over to his two companions; his voice was rough with hatred.

"I'll have the messenger leave it, with this bronze casket, on the steps of the temple of Jupiter," said he. "It's addressed to the priests; they'll consider it a miracle, no doubt. They'll know the casket's authentic! Here's the letter:

A gift to Rome from the gods; to the oppressor, to the doomed city upon whom falls the wrath of heaven. This relic is one of many things lost by the Senate and the people, through the greed of Lucius Mancinus. If you wish to know more, seek in Eryx. Seek with a sword and you shall find a sword, sharper than your own.

"Well?" said Pelargos, wrinkling up his face. "Why?"

"I want Rome to know what she's lost!" said Ramnes. "They'll send to Eryx, never fear. The thought of the treasure and, greater, the relics—that'll burn deep! This relic of Aeneas, sent them in contempt and disdain, will prove my words true. They'll send."

"Like a stone from a sling!" Pelargos laughed, and his face cleared. "Right. Mancinus will be at Eryx too, remember. There's your man, here's gold; get it over with, see Drusilla, and let's be gone."

Ramnes arranged with the staring countryman, saw him off with the sheepskin wrapped securely around the casket, and forced himself to meet Drusilla.

It was bitter, yet his heart went out to her with a rush of pity and love; she was sweet and gentle, dazed, bewildered, accepting all with serenity. Ramnes steeled himself to the thought that the effects of the drug might be permanent.

An hour later they were off, with a guide, leaving the armor to be brought on by Lars. Ramnes took the huge dagger, for he was minded to use it as a weapon when the chance came. It fascinated and repelled him, yet in his hands its great weight would prove terrible.

When they were filing off along a narrow hill trail, Pelargos eyed him sharply.

"Comrade, do you realize that you've changed?"

Ramnes nodded. "Yes. No doubt for the worse."

"For the better. You're ten years older than you were yesterday; but the change is deeper than lines in the face. You've found yourself. You've begun to fight the whips of destiny. I can appreciate your feelings."

"Oh!" Ramnes gave him a look. "You think you can, eh?"

"I felt the same way. When they blinded my wife."

The words came with a shock. "They? Who?"

"The Romans. There was a mistake; she was mixed up with other families of hostages. Some troops had revolted. The hostages were blinded or sold as slaves. They discovered the mistake and freed her, with the two boys. They tried to make amends and let her go. She went to Eryx. This did not help me particularly."

Oddly enough, this disclosure more than anything else helped Ramnes to adjust himself to facts. The simple words were eloquent of tragedy; he perceived what undisclosed deeps of suffering and experience lay beneath the boisterous talk and laughter of Pelargos. He could dimly see why this queer man was so secretive, having been so terribly hurt.

"Apparently," said Ramnes, "I have much to learn."

Pelargos laughed a little. "The best words I've heard you utter for a long time! By the way, I've learned that the priest of Minerva, in Eryx, is also head of the city council. The priests of Hercules will fatten hugely on our appearance and the fulfillment of the prophecies; we'll have to win over the priest of Minerva as well. These two are the chief powers in Eryx. There are other temples, of course, to all the rascally gods of Greece and Rome, to heroes and demi-gods like Hercules; but these two are the city gods."

Ramnes nodded. He was thinking of that figure sitting beside Lars on the neck of the old elephant, smiling, beautiful with high nobility, stricken.

They hastened on; loaded or not, that elephant would go at twice their speed. All day they traveled hill roads, and with sunset came into a wider and more traveled highway. They were far past Asculum, said the guide, and showed them how the road would turn south toward the eastern sea, and where they would find the ravine and the river that pierced the hills and opened the way to Eryx.

PAYING the man, they rode on into the evening, without incident, and into the long hours of the night, Ramnes driven by an insatiable desire to be at his journey's end—his brain feverish with a hundred conjectures and plans. In the cold north, the African army was winter-

ing, ere driving at Rome. If this fantastic adventure succeeded, as he began to believe that it must succeed, all the future hope and destiny of Eryx must lie with Hannibal; there lay the death-blow to Rome, waiting!

AT dawn, the road-fork appeared: A rambling roadside tavern and inn, the road striking off to the left. Ten miles to Eryx. A plunge through hills, out upon the farther marshes to the coast and the city there.

Pelargos pointed to the tavern.

"Wait here, sleep, rest. Tomorrow, go on with Lars and the big bull. Let the news go ahead of us. Remember, it will be only a week or two until Mancinus comes! The loss of the dagger won't worry him; Rome will come, and we must leave no stone unturned to meet Rome with the sword!"

Ramnes frowned. "Eh? You mean my message, my letter and the casket?"

"Oh, that!" Pelargos snapped his fingers. "Comrade, any result from that is a month or two distant. First our noble proprætor will strike. Never mind all that now; eat, sleep, be ready to welcome Drusilla! Our elephant must rest until tomorrow, also. There's a shrine and a grove, beyond the tavern—a good place for them. Be ready to meet them."

Ramnes nodded, drooping with weariness, and they turned in at the tavern. Ten miles! He wondered at the serenity and self-command of Pelargos, with heart's desire so close; he wondered how Lars Masena would look and act, with his own goal at hand.

Noon brought answer to the question: the seamed features of the elephant-trainer alight with eager joy and pride as the great beast padded in before the shrine, where Ramnes and Pelargos waited. The bull threw up his trunk and trumpeted in salute to Ramnes, then sank down. A number of country wagons had halted at the inn, the men holding their affrighted horses and staring slack-jawed.

Drusilla stepped lightly to the beast's shoulder, and Ramnes caught her as she came down, smiling. For a moment his heart leaped, for it seemed that she was herself again; then the hope was gone, as he looked into her eyes. She was weary, but showed only the docile spirit of an obedient child.

The three men fell to work loosing the burden. As Lars pointed out joyously, the bull was in good shape and thoroughly delighted with his change of scene.

The African speech and ways, after his sedentary years, had brought back his youth, for an elephant never forgets; and with Lars Masena he was like some monster dog, scarce letting him out of sight. This huge beast from the Atlas, with his curiously segmented trunk and his understanding of human ways, had a tremendous fascination for Drusilla, who could stand gazing at him or toying with him by the hour.

Lars stayed with the elephant. The others went to the inn, the country carts hastily rattling away at their approach. Drusilla was given a room, and Ramnes composed himself to patient waiting.

He and Pelargos, that afternoon, examined the dagger. To discover its secret was easy. One of the silver knobs in the gold haft sank in with pressure, and from a tiny aperture in the bronze blade, close to the point, oozed a drop of dark oily fluid.

"Some drug," said Pelargos, sniffing it. "Viscous and thick; it's been in the dagger for years, perhaps a century. That would explain the rapidity with which it works. For any proper miracle," and he sneered slightly, "you'd touch a person with this, and tomorrow or next day he'd show the power of the god! But now it works fast. A clever thing! Like some of the wonder-working statues I've seen in temples."

"An utterly damnable thing," growled Ramnes. He fingered the long golden haft, weighed it in his hand, nodded grudging approval. "At need, a cruel weapon in itself!"

"It'll serve, in such hands as yours. What's your first move, once Eryx is ours?"

Ramnes looked up. "To get a list of all Romans in the city."

"Lars can get that in ten minutes, from the Friends of Hercules. And then?"

"Expel them."

"Better to kill them; but you, unfortunately, aren't a god like Hannibal."

"If I were a god, Drusilla would be cured," said Ramnes gloomily. "No; merely a man in the likeness of a god, as you yourself said."

"With that bronze armor, you make a good imitation."

Ramnes cursed under his breath, and Pelargos changed the subject.

THAT evening the four of them were sitting at supper in the main room of the tavern, when there came a clatter of hoofs from the inn-yard. Pelargos went

swiftly to the window and craned out, and came back, satisfied.

"A man and a woman," he said negligently. "Country folk."

The two came in, talking with the innkeeper. White as death, Lars Masena started up from his stool, then fell back again and hid his face in his hands, trembling violently. Ramnes twisted around. The two arrivals were in Sabine dress, the man a broad countryman, the woman very erect and shapely, holding her head high, a corner of her mantle over her gray hair. At sight of her face, alight and eager and shining with emotion, the truth flashed upon Ramnes, but he could not credit it.

"Is one of you named Lars Masena?" asked the countryman, saluting them.

LARS uncovered his face and came to his feet. The woman looked at him, and he at her. Neither one spoke a word. Their hands went out, they fell into each other's arms with tears of joy, tears that crowded out all other thoughts. Drusilla, with her gentle smile, took them to her own room and left them alone.

"Oh, I had to fetch her!" explained the farmer, grinning widely as he sat and talked over a flagon of wine. He was one Faustus, the brother of Rhea. "She knew he'd be here, and she had to come."

"Indeed? A miracle!" exclaimed Pelargos, with caustic cynicism. "No doubt some god appeared to her with a revelation! Perhaps Phœbus himself, bidding her come!"

Faustus stared. "Eh? Not a bit of it. We heard all about you people yesterday. I belong to the Friends of Hercules, you know; we got word from Reate and Interamna about you. We've been expecting you. Our people in Eryx are expecting you."

Pelargos burst into a wild, shrill laugh.

"Ha! A miracle spoiled by common sense!" he cried, his eyes bright and burning, his face jerking. Suddenly he shoved back from the table so that it nearly overturned and came staggering to his feet, arms outflung. His voice rang hoarsely.

"Comrade, comrade! You've no need of me now. I'll take my horse and ride on, now, at once. There's no miracle for me, there's no work of the gods to aid a blind woman—"

With a rush, he was out of the tavern and gone, but Ramnes saw tears on his cheeks as he went, and sat quiet. Ramnes comprehended perfectly. Something,

here at the last, had broken down the man's chill restraint; this meeting between Lars and Rhea, no doubt. Everything, so long pent up, had burst forth in wild impulse. So, in the night, went Pelargos ahead.

THE sun was still low in the east when the first sight of Eryx broke upon them.

Rhea and her brother rode ahead, on horseback. Lars was perched on the elephant's neck; and behind, on top of the lashed load, Ramnes sat with Drusilla.

They were through the short but rugged hills. Here were the marshes, five miles of them stretching flat and brush-bare, crossed by the causeway and, where the river wended, a long bridge. On ahead, a white marble temple seemed hung in the sky. Drusilla cried out for the sheer beauty of it, and Ramnes nodded to her exclamations. Then it proved that the temple was on a hilltop, and on the other side of the hill, running down into the sea, lay Eryx, as yet invisible to them.

Not, indeed, until they came in between the low hills did the city open up, and all the gray sea beyond; it widened in a sudden vista of enchantment under the morning sunlight, a breath of beauty and life. The high walls and the gate, ahead; the sloping hillside of houses and shops and temples on beyond, running down to the curve of the bay with the warehouses and the wharves, with ships lying there and fishing-boats dotting the glittering waves past the island that formed safe harborage.

And all alive. The roadway, the gates, massed with staring people; the wide street on past the gate, thronged with crowds; voices in roar upon roar of greeting and welcome as the huge Getulian bull padded forward. Even to those who had ere this beheld an elephant, the actual presence of the beast was a marvel; the massive figure in flashing bronze, the smiling, dreamy-eyed woman at his side, were gods come to earth again, Hercules of old and the divine gray-eyed Athene, the Minerva of Etruscans and Romans. The shouts lifted in rolling unison from streets and crowded house-roofs and gateway.

Before the city gates were soldiers, and a group of priests and old men. Ramnes sighted a figure towering in the background, and smiled with grim comprehension; he could see the hand of Pelargos in this reception.

"Stop before the gates," he said to Lars, as the name of Hercules reverberated in air. "Do you know what you're going to do with this brute of yours?"

Lars flung a grin over his shoulder. "Aye; give him an ocean bath. He's wild for it!"

Fronting the group of priests, the elephant halted, flung up his trunk at the bidding of Lars, and trumpeted mightily. Even the priests recoiled in an access of fear. Then he knelt, and threw back his trunk as Drusilla stepped on his head. It circled her, lifted her, and set her on the ground.

"Athene!" lifted the shouts. "Athene!"

Ramnes followed, the baldric and dagger in his hand. His gaze had already swept the priests. Most of them were priests of the Hercules cult, the old men were city elders; one priest with two attendants was apart from the others. A massive-bearded, dignified old man, with the figure of Athene worked in his robe. The priest, then, of Minerva or Athene, as she was known in Eryx.

"Welcome!" cried the chief priest of Hercules, as flowers pelted all around the two. "Welcome, Athene! Welcome, Hercules! Welcome to your city of Eryx!"

"You are very kind," said Drusilla, smiling.

Ramnes pushed past her angrily.

"We are no gods," he exclaimed. "This lady is named Drusilla. I am named Ramnes. No more of this nonsense about gods! I bring gifts for the priests of Hercules, on the beast yonder. We have come as the friends of Eryx, as the enemies of Rome; if it be the will of this city, I will lead her and secure her against the power of Rome as best I may. But, if the people of Eryx love Rome and welcome her yoke, then we go elsewhere."

FROM the soldiers and the massed crowds arose wild yells, in an outburst of hatred and tempestuous emotion. "Away with Rome! Down with Rome!" But Ramnes, watching the priests and elders, saw the warmth and eagerness in their faces, and knew there was no question here.

"Where is the priest of Athene?" he demanded, and turned to the stately elder. "Here," said he, extending the baldric and massive dagger, "is something that in past ages the goddess is said to have given to Eryx. Now I give it to you, who represent her."

The priest took the dagger, his face alight, eager, shrewdly suspicious. His

expression changed to one of wonder and awe. The crowd had fallen silent, staring curiously, hushed.

"The dagger of Eryx!" exclaimed the priest. He held it out. "Wear it, son of the gods! Wear it for Eryx!"

Applause and shouts welled up from hysteric throats.

UNDER cover of the tumult, Ramnes spoke impatiently.

"I tell you, I'm no god! Once and for all—"

In the faces of the priests, he read a smile that checked him. The chief priest of Hercules broke in upon him with amused warning.

"Careful, careful! We understand each other; let us have no mistakes. Eryx has need of the gods, friend. Let us each give what the other most desires—eh? If you can give us aid against Rome, we welcome it and you. Get on your great beast again, follow us; there's a dwelling on the temple grounds for you. Agreed?"

In the face of the priest of Athene, Ramnes read confirmation. He broke into a laugh, and threw up his hand at Pelargos, who was grinning happily, holding up a half-grown boy in either arm so they could see over the heads of the crowd, a woman clinging to him. Ramnes took off the heavy bronze helmet, and pushed back his hair.

"Agreed!" he said, and caught one of the roses that came from the eager crowd, and turned to Drusilla. "Tribute, lady! Eryx gives tribute to beauty!"

She took the rose, thrust it in her hair, and smiled. The crowd yelled delirious applause; but Ramnes, glimpsing the face of Athene's priest, saw a flash of comprehension in those deep eyes. His heart sank, but he must see the thing through with good grace, and he handed Drusilla up to her perch again, and followed.

A procession sprang to life, heading through the gates. Priests, city elders, singers and dancers and musicians—no, thought Ramnes, decidedly the Stork had not wasted his time! We understand each other, eh? Those words delighted him, for in their significance lay much that was unuttered.

The temple of Athene was on the height. Below, overlooking the water, lay the more popular shrine of Hercules. For this the procession headed.

Ramnes caught the chuckles of Lars Masena, noted the dreamy smile of Drusilla,

saw the tall shape of Pelargos appearing now and again. Eryx had need of the gods; let each give what the other most desires—eh? Shrewd words. Let the people think what they like. There was no deception, no illusion, so far as the rulers of Eryx were concerned; they, too, had bitter need.

He could see it all, as he swayed to the thrust of the beast under him, and stayed Drusilla, holding her hand, against the swing. Now the game was his to play, frankly and with a will, to play hard and all the way, Pelargos backing him, Lars and the Friends of Hercules backing him. Gold and treasure to those who had lack of it, promises here, threats and action there. When that stately priest gave him back the dagger of Eryx, the action was symbolic.

Eryx was his, was in his hand; he, the dictator, the tyrant as the term ran in Greek, the leader of the people—he, the symbol of power! The ragged barbarian from across the Alps had come to rainbow's end, a man in the likeness of a god, hailed as a god, given the power and glory and attributes of a god, leading this city and people against the oppression and greed and injustice of Rome—dream's end!

SUDDENLY his gaze met the smiling eyes of Drusilla, and a groan came to his lips; the heart in him turned to water, and the exultation died out of his face. He would have given it all, all, to make this woman herself again; and he could not.

He could not. His shoulders squared at the thought. But, by the gods, he could fight through like a man! And, looking down, glimpsing Pelargos above the heads of the yelling crowd, he waved his hand and caught an answering wave.

Pelargos understood—for was not the woman with him a blind woman?



This novel of Hannibal's invasion comes to its climax in the next, the March, issue.

The Queen's

By SIDNEY HERSCHEL SMALL

GEORGE STANTON stopped his car hastily, avoiding contact with the sedan ahead; the machine behind him came bumper to bumper, without damage. Evening fog, thick off the Pacific, pressed everything closely together, just as it had when causing the skid responsible for the accident at the intersection and the resultant traffic snarl—pressed transportation, people, color, sound, into one impatient, throbbing, jangling discord.

Horns brayed; Stanton heard, as a mocking overtone, the fog-warnings on the bay. Heard music from a café orchestra: a saxophone turning ■ minor note to melted butter, a violin hardening it to a wire in the wind: and from a car's radio the instant thin repetition, precise and uncanny. He heard annoyed voices, with one, somewhere not far off on the sidewalk, vociferously oratorical. He saw the sign lights, scarlet, vermilion, pink, vivid orange, blue, purple, fighting with dull ochre window-illumination.

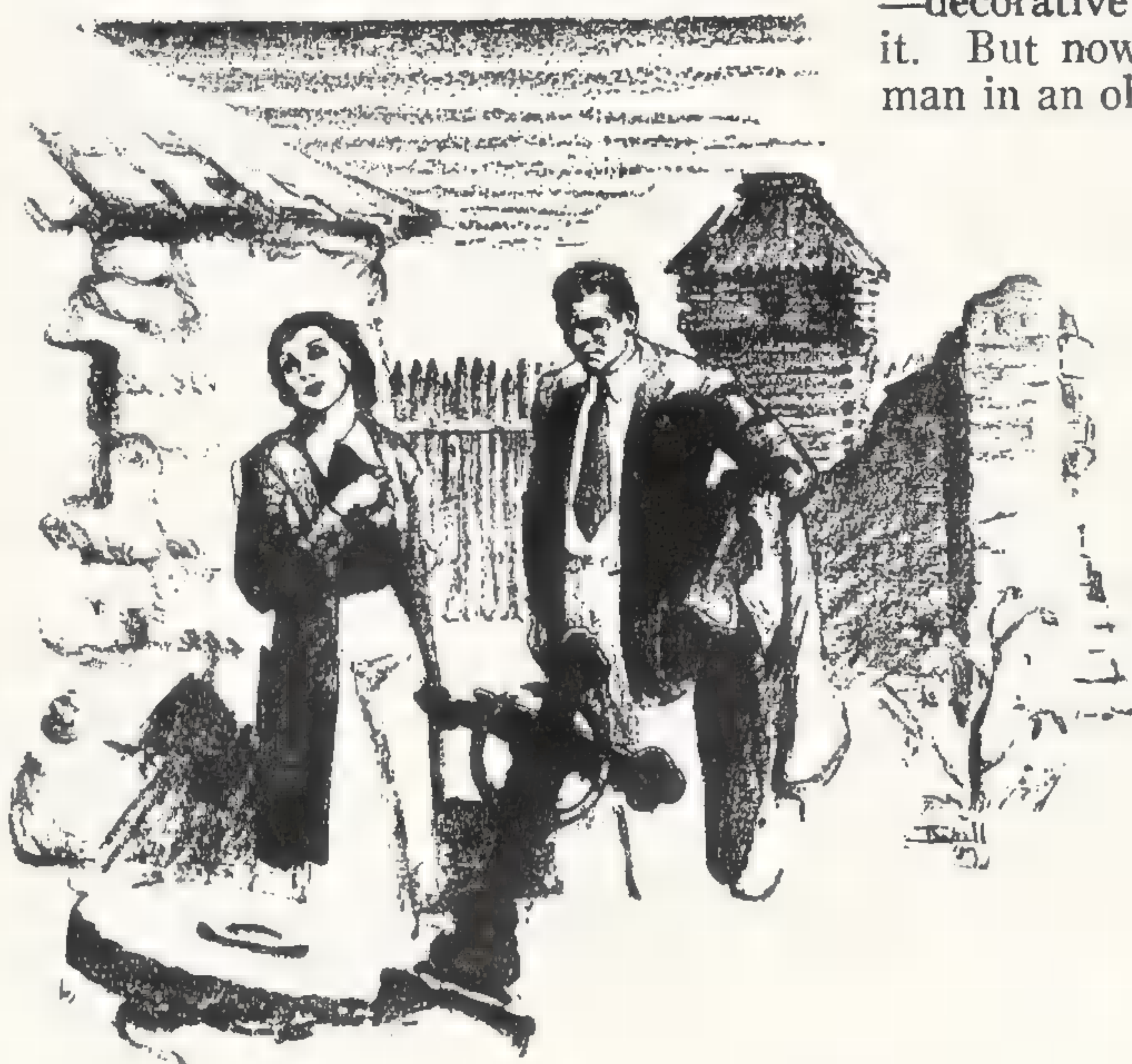
Hungry, tired, and sweaty from ■ day climbing along cliffs, Stanton was tempted to add the din of his own horn to the

clamor. The scene might be, as he'd first thought, very American; but he wanted a hot bath, ■ stiff drink and dinner.

After that, he intended to do a bit of gloating by telephone; he had seen a red-billed tropic-bird nesting above the cormorant rookery, no matter what authorities said they were never found so far north. He had seen the female, the seaweed nest with its one wine-colored egg, the male in flight, its tail-feathers showing why it was also called the marlin-spike—and he had film in his camera to prove it. Fog had driven him from the cliffs before he had been able to do much about the cormorants.

However, it had been an elegant day. He'd not mind, tomorrow, listening to his father's opinion on unrest, the price of bonds, why George didn't keep up golf instead of photographing fool birds—and how it was a good thing people in the bank didn't know about such a ridiculous hobby. After which, if things followed in the usual course, George would take some important client to lunch, seeing to it that flowers were sent the man's wife at her hotel.

That was his job in the Stanton bank—decorative vice-president, George called it. But now he was just a tired young man in an old suit and a slip-on sweater.



Illustrated by
Irwin Weill

Helena said: "I am not a fool—but one hopes when there seems so little else to do."

Orphan

A colorful story of California and Russia—today and in the day of the czars!

He was about to sound his horn and add to the clamor when he saw several men from the bank in the homeward-bound crowd on the sidewalk. He was about to offer a lift. Then, behind them, he saw a girl, walking also. He recognized her at once as another bank employee. She was new, working in the foreign-business department, doing Russian and French translating.

A girl was certain to be more tired than men. George grinned as the excuse came to him. He had been curious about her: she was a slim, thoughtful girl, with soft hair and dark eyes and a tremulous mouth; and when he had requested translations, taking the letters to her himself, and then attempted to extend the conversation, nothing had come of it. Her name was Helena Andrews.

As he started to call, "Oh, Miss Andrews!" she moved crosswise against the stream of pedestrians, stopping, George saw, near the vociferous street-orator. A word or two of the man's ranting came to Stanton above the din of horns; octopi were involved, and banks and bankers. The man stopped talking when he saw the girl—then came off his box, and took her hand.

Stanton's curiosity by now was consuming. The girl's back was to him. As he stared, a belated bird crossed his vision, giving him a quick flash of flight colors. It joined the squabbling English sparrows who were waiting for the huckster's horse to nose grains out of the worn feed-bag.

The girl was forgotten. Stanton jerked his camera from the dash compartment, and was out of the car. The bird was of sparrow size, but the edges of the smooth breast feathers were dark, the breast itself, centrally, unquestionably a lustrous black. Might be a Yakutat song-sparrow!

There ought to be enough light, from the signs, for a picture. Stanton pointed the camera at the feathered Alaskan visitor. The street-orator happened to be directly in line.

Stanton's finger pressed down. At the same instant as the click which exposed



the film, the camera was struck out of his hand and hurled to the street.

The orator was waving his fists in Stanton's face. "You cannot take my picture! Fink! Go away!"

George said, very slowly: "I was photographing a rare bird." The din, close by, diminished, as drivers watched. The girl, Stanton saw, had her hand to her mouth; she looked as if she wanted to slip away, but could not. He added, in the same level voice: "Afraid to have your picture taken? Don't belong in this country, do you? That why you smashed the camera?"

"So now you call the cops?"

George said, half watching the girl: "You're not so smart, putting ideas into my head. No, I'm not going to call anyone. I'm going to—"

THE girl came over now. "Please," she said, and then: "Mr. Stanton, Gregory didn't understand."

"It's time he learned," George said.

She stepped between them. Gregory, George observed, was a pretty husky man: long arms, wide shoulders, barrel chest. He picked the exact spot on the jutting jaw—then realized there must not be a fight. His father, family, the bank, wouldn't relish the newspaper accounts. Even the absolute truth would be bad enough, although it wouldn't be printed. The stories would concentrate on George Stanton, a street-orator, and a pretty girl who was a bank employee. Much could be done with such ingredients; and the result, with pictures, would be messy.

Helena Andrews said, miserably: "If there is trouble, Mr. Stanton, I will lose my position."

This was true. George stooped and picked up the battered camera. "Skip it," he said. "I'm taking my broken dolly and going home. But tell your friend to go easy. Some day the Cossacks will get him."

She said: "Thank you." Then, her eyes lifting: "Do you really know about birds? Do you?"

"You've been listening to ways of going after new business," said George. "Always hit 'em in their hobbies. But I've said we'll forget this, so it isn't necessary to put up a sales-talk."

She stepped closer to Stanton, and laid an imperative hand on his arm.

"That is not the reason. Have you ever been to that part of California where the Russians lived? Fort Ross? Have you ever seen eagles there?"

Her insistence was obvious: To direct attention away from Gregory, who, glowering, hadn't moved away. Men went back to their cars, convinced that there wasn't going to be a fight.

Stanton looked at her, and was amazed at the real excitement in her eyes.

TRAFFIC was moving. Cars behind Stanton's were fairly bursting apart with sound. The officer from the intersection was coming to see what caused the new delay. George said: "If I don't move the car, there'll be one more tag to be fixed." He returned to his original intention as if nothing had happened. "Can I take you somewhere?"

Gregory, instantly, began to sputter words which Stanton supposed must be Russian. The girl's head went high as she cut him off with a harsh-sounding reply in the same language, although her cheeks began to flame.

"Nice ideas he must have," George commented briefly. He opened the car door. "Coming?"

Helena said, "Yes," through whatever Gregory was snarling, and without another word, got into the machine.

The car was in high gear before Stanton said: "If there'd been a fight, your boy friend would have been given free transportation home, at the taxpayers' expense. You thought of that, didn't you? Or was it just your job?" When she didn't answer, he went on: "Don't say anything about all this. The Stanton bank is rather conservative. They don't like strange friendships any more than they do peculiar hobbies."

Helena Andrews said: "It was difficult to think. What I said about birds was not to stop trouble." The car passed a green light. "My work—the money I am paid for it—is so important. But the other is important too. . . . Birds." She turned toward him. "Have you never seen eagles at Fort Ross? Never?"

"Should there be eagles there?" George's curiosity, his vulnerable point, was rising again. "The golden eagle," he explained, "stays in the Sierras. The southern bald keeps close to the Santa Barbara Islands, a long way off. There are no eagles on the cold north coast, although, after a tropic-bird and a Yakutat song-sparrow, I wouldn't be surprised to see a winged rattlesnake fly over our heads."

"Birds, sometimes, are not where they have ever been before?"

"I don't believe," Stanton told her, "that there's ever been an eagle near the abandoned Russian settlement. Why do you ask?"

"They must be there! It is all in a letter. They were there once. But everyone I've asked, or Gregory has asked, tells the same thing. That it is impossible—that there have never been eagles on the north coast."

Her distress was too real, too restrained, to be acting. George said: "And no tropic-birds this far north, either. If Gregory hasn't ruined my film, there are going to be retractions before very long. There *could* be an eagle at Fort Ross. After today, there could be anything." He looked at the girl. "Why not prove that Gregory knows what he's talking about, and have dinner with me? Isn't that the way he said we bankers always start?"

She flushed; when she said, "I must go home," she saw George was grinning. "I should love it," she admitted, "but—"

"Swell," said George instantly, and swung the car off the avenue. "You can't tell me about this eagle business in the bank; why, you won't talk to me about anything, except translations!"

Helena said: "Already, some of the girls have asked me why you bring letters instead of sending them by a boy."

"Tell 'em," said George, "that I need the exercise. If it comes to that," he added shrewdly, "I notice that a good many other men do the same thing."

She sank lower in her seat, and gave George a corner of an eye. She said: "Oh, you've noticed."

"That'll do," George said firmly. "I'm a starving man. Wait until I get my strength before doing any more of that."

SLEEK machines were in front of the restaurant Stanton selected, but the head-waiter bowed to Stanton without widening his eyes at George's attire. Stanton ordered with care; a thin soup



with Parmesan, filets covered with thick pungent sauce, a bottle of dark Barbera from the hot uplands, suave and fragrant.

"You are curious," Helena said, when she picked up her glass. She sipped, and then looked squarely at Stanton. "You must know," she said. "Listen. I will tell you all—*all*—that there is."

IT was a story of war, slaughter, revolt; the escape of the girl's mother from Russia, an English marriage. "My father insisted on returning to Russia, to see if anything remained. The great house was gone. My father found a few things in the village: a square of embroidery, a vase, a box of my great-grandmother's. There were letters in it, in a small secret compartment which hadn't been opened. One of these was very old; it was the reason, when my father died, that I came here. Some one in London gave me Gregory's address. He is the son of one of my family's servants. At first he helped me, since my money was gone. Now that I have found work, I repay him. If—if only—he did not—"

"Gregory," said George, "continues to rate a punch on the nose."

The soup was hot, delicious. "I was so hungry," confessed Helena. "I *am* so hungry. It has been a long time since I—have dined."

"The company has a lot to do with it," George suggested.

"In the bank, you are so important. You take great men to lunch; you send flowers to lovely ladies; you—"

The decorative vice-president said: "That'll do! It's a lot more fun to take pretty girls to dinner."

Color rose in her cheeks.

"—Money, rings . . . buried near the place where the great eagle watches."

"My great-grandfather," she said hastily, "had written that letter. He was one of the officers at Fort Ross. When all the Russian land was sold, there was only one small vessel, the *Constantine*, remaining to take settlers and soldiers back to Alaska, at the stormiest season of the year. My great-grandfather had money, rings. Rather than risk losing them, he hid everything—the letter tells where. He died while on the ocean." She leaned forward. "It is buried near the place where the great eagle watches. My great-grandfather said so. He was there many years, and the eagle was always, always watching in the same place."

George said: "That was a hundred years ago." He moved his hand to allow the waiter to put down a plate. People had glanced at him, some bowing, and at his companion; George knew that they wondered who the girl might be. He was feeling curiously fine. Why, if somebody, tomorrow or the next day, saw Helena in the bank, he, George Stanton, didn't give a hang. He said: "I suppose you've gone north and looked about at Fort Ross?"

"No. It is too expensive. There is no railway. One goes by machine—"

"Tomorrow morning," George agreed. "Blame it on the tropic-bird and the curiosity in me. Or maybe I'm going romantic. We'll make an early start—two is none too early. There'll still be time for us to get a little sleep."

Helena said, "Oh," and put down her fork. Then she went on in a tight voice: "The dinner—my story is not enough to pay for it?"

"I want to get there before sunrise. That's the time to see birds." Stanton reached across the table, careless of watchers, and covered the girl's hand with his. "Gregory has uglier ideas than I thought," he said. "You don't mean what you've implied."

He could feel a trembling in the hand under his own. Then Helena said: "No. And it was horrid of me."

THE city, at two in the morning, was cold and silent; Stanton had brought blankets, and wrapped the girl in them. He drove rapidly to the long, winding Gate bridge approach; westward, could be seen the low fog, thick and white, and above it, the winking eyes of the stars, which dimmed, vanished, whenever the searchlight on Alcatraz swept across the sky.

"San Francisco," George said, slowing the car as the tires hissed on the wet paving of the bridge, "—it might have been Russian, mightn't it? Or English, since Drake was here first, or Spanish, or Mexican. One of our clients is an importer of furs. He's great on what happened in the fur trade. D'you know, there're islands we can't see, the Farallons, where Russians killed thousands of sea-otters and seals? American ships carried the furs to Canton. The Spaniards wouldn't allow the Aleut hunters in the bay, so the Russians bargained with us, with Americans, and we raided the shores. Cleaned up on the otters. The Spaniards and Indians didn't hunt them. Now that we haven't any otters left," George added, "we exterminate the birds. . . . Are you asleep, woman?"

Helena said: "No. If it is cold here, Fort Ross will be desolate. I have a map; your Bodega is *Roumianzoff*; San Sebastian is *Slavyanka*. The Russians

should have held their land. My great-grandfather was not in favor of giving it up. Then I should have been a Californian. Or—this would be Russia."

"And where would I be?" George asked.

Helena said: "There is that to be considered." She breathed deeply, and then put her head back, relaxing. "I did not sleep last night, after you left me," she admitted. "Gregory came to my room, full of argument. He did not want me to come. After that, even after I explained all about you, I lay awake, wondering." Her voice softened; the words blurred together. "About what Gregory preaches. If he truly believes it, or if he had money, if—oh, I wondered about so many different things."

"About me?"

She did not reply. When Stanton started the car climbing the hills on the far side of the bridge, he knew that she slept. As he drove, he did a bit of considering of his own. It was ridiculous, now, to continue to feel that he was taking this girl to Fort Ross because of curiosity. So far as the search was concerned, George believed that her great-grandpapa had probably gambled away the money, writing a tall story home, including Russian eagles, to avoid trouble.

Helena, obviously, believed the yarn. George knew that, from the ease with which he had brushed away her last scruple—as to what might happen at the bank when she wasn't at her desk. Nor was she playing any sort of game. She had done no maneuvering to arouse his interest; quite the reverse.

He drove smoothly, rapidly, through towns, across a long black marsh, where sifting fog slowed the car's pace; it was after four when he stopped for gas. The girl didn't waken. She was still asleep when the highway branched into a narrower road which was a series of dips and swoops and rises, a country where orchards—apples, prolific children of Russian parentage—were laden with their striped green and red Gravensteins. These, by five o'clock, were replaced with heavier wild growth; laurel, lilac, red-barked harlequin madrone, and finally, as the road began twisting through inky cañons, redwood.

Once in the ravines, the machine lights seemed to shine more brightly than before, as if the day were actually more distant; the hills, now, ran north and south. It was colder than when crossing the Gate bridge—odorous, damp, chilly.



Fog, like clinging rain, settled down wetly; and in sleep the girl pressed closer. When she began to shiver, Stanton stopped the car at a small bridge beneath which water ran, and gently woke her.

She was stiff with cold, as was Stanton; when they washed in the stream, the water was like an icy slap. But there was steaming coffee in the thermos; and after Helena drank, and George lit a cigarette for her, she was smiling. She looked up, through the gigantic trees, to the grayness above.

"We are so far away," she said. "It is fun."

"It's remarkable how much fun things can be," George agreed, looking at her. A bird made a sleepy noise. *Tsee—sweetsee*. The final drowsy syllable was lost in the rippling of water around a rock. "Chickadee," Stanton said. "The gossip and alarm of the woods. Probably a chestnut-back."

They drove on—reached the coast, where surf boomed, and unseen in the fog, creamed on the sand. Water, shore, were invisible. To the east the fog was turning opalescent—green, silver, lilac.

Stanton drove carefully along the wet cliff-road. Where a rocky headland protruded, the way swung hillward; suddenly, without warning, it made an abrupt turn to the west, the ocean, and Stanton shifted gear for the steep descent. Then, quickly, he stopped, turning off the lights.

Helena said: "Ah."

The abandoned fort was squarely ahead of them, at the end of the road. Fog softened the outlines, removed desertion. It was possible to imagine that the place was asleep, and not deserted since 1841; the Greek chapel at the corner of the stockade thrust up into the fog; a long building, a barracks once, seemed to house soldiers. So the settlement must have looked to the Indians, to the girl's great-grandfather when he returned after secreting his store of wealth before departing for Alaska.

WHAT vision, Stanton wondered, did Helena have? That which he saw? Officers' quarters filled with men in uniform, the commandant's residence, the full barns and busy forge, Indians and Aleuts at work, boats being built at the shipyard below the cliffs, fruit-trees in bearing, black wheat in the fields, fat cattle and sheep at pasture. . . .

A higher wave, beyond the headland, set a buoy to ringing, a sharp, metallic



clang-clang, like a chapel-bell; the illusion became complete. Even Stanton could imagine officers, their wives, hurrying to the chapel; smoke—fog, of course—appeared to rise from cooking-fires; a gull, screaming, might have been the voice of an Indian. Automatically, Stanton marked the flying bird; its deeply forked tail, subtle markings, indicated a Forster's tern.

Then, pale, luminous, the sun climbed over the hills and trees. Fog, on the coast, turned into tendrils. Fort Ross became a ruin, empty, desolate, a stockade broken down, the wrecks of buildings.

The girl sat silent.

Father Quail, crest trembling valiantly, came out of the brush and looked around; he jumped on a stump and called his family, *querk! querk!* and his brown wives and youngsters flocked out on the road. An insolent jay swept past, a flash of fiery blue. Brewer's blackbirds came to examine the unripe wild grain. There were sparrows everywhere, long-billed fox-sparrows, a caroling song-sparrow, olive-gray rufous-crowned sparrows. A titmouse sounded his plucky call, and a fat brown towhee strutted out to listen.

Helena said: "Birds everywhere, but not the one I hoped to see. You have showed me that."

The line of surf appeared; the fog was dispersing. George Stanton said: "The worst of it is that your great-grandfather might've been right. Eagles often nest in the same place, and the nests are visible. They'd stay in the same tree if it made a good look-out. What makes me really doubtful is that this isn't in any sense eagle country. No food. They don't bother with small birds. Rabbits, ducks, grouse, fawns, yes." He switched on the car lights, turned them off; it was full day. "We'll drive down to the fort and talk things over."

But what, he asked himself, as he got out of the machine, inside the stockade, was there to talk over? An enormous millstone, gray-white, reflected the sun; light glinted off the bricks where the powder magazines had once been. A

remnant of carved wood, with a Greek cross, showed where Russia had buried her dead. It was all as hopeless, futile, as the girl's search. What concerned him more was how she must be feeling.

Helena spoke slowly, when George had poured coffee, opened a package of sandwiches. She said: "I am not a fool about everything. But one hopes things, when there seems so little else to do." She smiled. "I'm really a Queen's Orphan. . . . You've never heard of them? They are girls whose parents are dead; if they see a man they'd like to marry, they can appeal to the queen, and the poor man cannot say no."

George grinned.

"So that's what caused the revolution? Hmm! Are you requesting my hand in marriage?"

Helena laughed; she said: "If I found the treasure, I might!" Past the stockade, past twisted cypress on the cliff, she saw how the black water had become a golden sheet. "So you needn't worry," she said. "And you needn't worry about my crying nor feeling badly." Her eyes were wet. "Let's go up to the fields. I'd like to take some flowers back. Or you can wait here."

"I'll go," George said. She had courage. "Ready?"

THE wild grass was wet and green; blue lupine, with the fog's wetness, seemed silver in the sun; scarlet columbine swayed where the shade was blackest, and scarlet larkspur glowed in the open spaces. A creamy gold azalea, tree-high, held out its waxy trumpets.

Stanton's eyes, when not on the girl, went still higher. A vulture flapped overhead; but no one, ever, could mistake that rusty bird for an eagle. Pecking away at a rotten stump, for his breakfast, was a red-shafted flicker. An Anna's hummer, head iridescent rosy purple, body metallic, wings a blur of shimmering purple-blue, fed in the azaleas. Somewhere, near, a russet-backed thrush sang; the bird was invisible, blended in hue with the tints of fallen leaves and shadow. A rarer hermit thrush said, "*kkk-ring!*" and flew out of the brush.

"The fun about birds," said Stanton, "is that you never know what you'll see." He went on: "Let's get this straight. This isn't the last time we're going places. It's just the first time." He discovered the humming-bird's nest, far out on a slender limb. The needle-like bill of the female, the duller, non-metal-

lic head feathers, were visible over the edge of the tiny nest. "It's just the first time," he repeated.

"Why couldn't we imagine that nothing happened in Russia, and that you came there, and—"

"And I'd call you Your Highness and come creeping up on my knees. It's better this way." That, George feared, was not a kind thing to say. He added: "Has anyone ever told you that eyes just can't be like yours?"

Helena said, "No." She looked back, toward the wreck of the old fort. Then, without warning, she threw back her head, laughed, and her cheeks became warm. She took a flower and thrust the stem through Stanton's buttonhole. "I'll be a good companion until we're back," she said. "I'll be whatever you want."

HE thought, "What *do* I want?" Her implication was that this day must be the end of nonsense. George tried to smooth out his ideas, to make them coherent and sensible; then he heard the sound of a car's engine. The hum vanished as the machine dropped down one of the ravine inclines, grew louder as it crested a rise; echo pulled the different noises together. "Company coming," George said. "A nice noisy picnic. We won't see another bird except sparrows. We— Look!"

He clutched her arm, pointing upward with the other hand. A bird was flying from the beach to the trees—a large bird, brown beneath, white and shining black above. The wing-tips and tail were barred with ebony.

Helena said: "The *eagle!*"

"Osprey," George muttered. "Fish-hawk. It's been fishing, too; it's carrying a fish to the nest. You can tell that by the labored flight. It's a male. No yellow markings on the breast." Stanton seized the girl's flowers, and with them, laid out a line marking the bird's course. "The nest'll be in plain sight, if I can get the right direction. It will be on the top of a tree, where the ospreys can keep an eye on the water, and see when the gulls begin to feed. An osprey! That's what your great-grandpapa saw—and smart fellow, me, I never guessed. I just said there weren't any eagles. I know too much."

The osprey was out of sight.

"This bird," George said, "is fifty generations or so removed from the original one; and if you believe what you're told by people who don't know, there's noth-

ing so abandoned as last year's nest. So we'll go look."

The girl was breathing quickly; so was Stanton, since excitement is infectious. It was slow, careful work. Again and again Stanton aligned himself with direction of the osprey's flight. He was counting on the bird flying the shortest, straightest distance to the nest, since it was weighted with food. There was little brush beneath the redwoods. It was entirely possible for Stanton to chart, continually, his course. Once a tree was directly on the line of flight; when he looked up, he saw higher trees' tops: the osprey nest would not be here, but where there was unobstructed vision to the shore.

He was intent on his job, had forgotten the engine noise. Neither Stanton nor the girl knew if they were being watched or followed.

They reached an open space, into which the climbing sun struck with slantwise greenish-gold rays.

"Look," George said. The girl saw the huge mass of sticks and bark. "That nest has been there a long time. Some ospreys use the same nests for so long that the inside is seven or eight feet deep, from the continual weight of the birds, and additional building. But a hundred years is a long time. I'll like you just as well without the crown jewels."

Helena's face was pale, her lips compressed. Her heart, George supposed, must be beating quickly. She said: "The box was hidden under a root of the tree. On the east side. A root partially out of the ground." Both saw such a root.

As if fearful to risk the final search, she said: "My great-grandfather thought, if the old vessel did reach Alaska, that he could convince the governor to reopen the settlement. Then, on returning, the box could be taken out. Instead, everything, cattle, guns, equipment, was sold, and the Russian dream was ended. Do—do you think—*it*—is still here?"

George believed the odds poor. As a banker, it wasn't even a gamble. Was the girl going to be horribly disappointed? His feeling toward her was increasingly keen and personal; he didn't want her to be hurt.

There was tall green growth to the east of the tree, in a depression into which the great root curved; there was also a sturdier, older growth, where the feathery foliage was full thirty feet from the ground. The tree itself must com-



"I take no chances," said Gregory.
"You are the one who took chances."

mand a view of the cliffs and beach, the settlement. George said: "There's the possibility that somebody may've been here ahead of us, years ago."

An accented voice broke in: "Stand still, Mr. George Stanton! You'd lie to a girl, and then come back and take what belongs to her."

GEORGE saw the man Gregory, and another man beside him. Gregory had a gun. The second man carried shovel and ax.

"You've been listening to your own speeches," George said. "Or do you object to me just because I'm in a bank? So is Miss Andrews, you know. Put that gun away. Doesn't two to one satisfy you?"

"I take no chances." Gregory said something to the other man, in Russian; the second man went to the long root and began to chop. A sapsucker, red, black and yellow, darted through the clearing; Father Quail sent a sharp warning to his family; a female wren-tit flew out of a cup-shaped grass nest. "You," said Gregory to the girl, "are the one who took chances. Coming here with him."

Helena said, in English, "Do not be a fool!"

Gregory shrugged, and replied in Russian; whatever it was he went on to say left her with clenched hands.

"I'm going to smoke a cigarette," said George, "so don't think because I'm putting my hand in my pocket, I'm drawing a gun." The muzzle of Gregory's weapon covered him as he lit the cigarette; the tobacco was dry and bitter. George was pleased that his hands were steady. Not bad for a decorative vice-president.

The ax had made the first cut through the root; there was the pungent odor of redwood. At a word from Gregory, the chopper moved eastward a few feet, and began making the second cut. Obviously, Gregory not only knew the details of the letter, but had been listening to what had been said. George wondered exactly how much the other understood.

Helena said: "Put away that gun. If there is treasure here, it is mine. It belonged to my family."

"Your family," Gregory said placidly, "had no treasure. All was confiscated. So, you have no treasure. And you are no longer the Countess Helena, let me tell you! So be silent."

The wielder of the ax, a man less sharp than his tool, completed the second cut,

and pried up the severed section of root. He began chopping again, and continued until the entire exposed portion of root had been removed. Then, with methodical precision, he began digging in the soft leaf-mold along the course of the root.

"You have already found it," Gregory cried, when it was evident there was no purpose in more digging. "The box was there. It is gone."

"The cupboard was bare," agreed Stanton. "How could we have found it? You were watching us; we didn't dig at all." He dropped the cigarette, ground out the coal. "Well, anyhow, you had a nice ride in the country, far from corporations and banks and octopi."

The workman, Gregory's companion, coughed, and asked Stanton for a cigarette; George threw him the package. In the silence a jay insolently swooped down and picked up a boring-grub knocked out of the root. Stanton marked that it was blue and sooty black, crested.

Suddenly Gregory shouted, "I slap you in the face!" and came closer to Stanton. "I spit on you! Banker! Seducer! Milk-fed veal!"

THE gun shook; Gregory, George realized, was working himself into a rage. The thing to do, probably, was to knock the gun from the man's hand. It was a trick which ought to work, but George had no intention of trying it. He said, instead, "If you pull too hard on the trigger, the police are apt to make you think that Cossacks are Boy Scouts." He went on calmly: "Suppose, for the sake of argument, that you did find the box. What would you do? Give it to Miss Andrews? Or give it away, as you want bankers to do with customers' money?"

"Is that your affair?"

George said: "I suppose it isn't. I'm just curious."

Breathing deeply, Gregory faced the girl. He said: "Enough of this. Money or no money, it is all the same between us. I am not like this vermin. You know why I wanted the box. For you!"

"That is not true," Helena said.

George was playing with an idea.

He said: "Gregory, you're in a tough place. I could call it kidnaping. You will have to take my word for it, but I won't say anything to the police, provided you get out, and get out fast."

"How can I be sure?"

George said: "You can't."

Shrugging, Gregory said: "Come, Helena. I take you back." When she shook her head, he began to talk rapidly; pleading at first, shifting to crackling Russian, fiercely, when she still refused.

"This," said George, "isn't part of the bargain. I don't know what you're saying, but I don't think I like it. Get going."

He stood without moving until the two men started down the hill; then he said: "You see how it is. I should've gone through with my threat to thrash him. The funny part of it is that if I hadn't thought of something else,—a sort of economic experiment,—I'd have tried it, and had lead indigestion by this time. Oh, well—"

"I couldn't go with him."

George said: "Where the hollow is, there was another tree. The younger growth has come up from either old roots or the original stump. The ospreys chose a new nest where they could still see the shore, a new nest in the next tree. This one, maybe. Perhaps your box is somewhere in the depression, where the old tree stood. It's entirely possible."

"That's what you almost told Gregory. You wanted to see what he'd do if he found it." Helena's head lifted. "He—oh, he told me what he'd do."

SLOWLY George said: "Then I must find out if you're as lovely as I think you are. I'll need expert advice on that. My father's. You could be in the bank for a million years, and he'd never notice you. And wait until my family finds out you're a real, live countess—"

"Your family!" Helena's face whitened. "Please—"

"You'll find they have a lot of curious notions," said George. "You've got to remember that Greataunt Ysobel was ■ De la Torre, and Uncle Frederick drinks brandy and soda; and some are so Yank they talk through their noses, and we've names like George and Ferdinand and Oskar. . . . We're ■ mixed as America." Urgently, he said: "Come home with me, Helena."

"How can I?" She choked a little. "I know, now, I cannot stay in the bank. I knew that last night, when people you know saw me."

George rubbed his chin. "If we find the box, what would be in it?"

"My great-grandfather's share from the trading—gold, a ring of emeralds, a jeweled cross, sapphires and pearls, which he wore around his neck; it was very

old." Helena's eyes half closed, as if she could see the box being opened. The gold would no longer be bright, but soft and leaf-brown like the sun on the earth; surely the emeralds would glitter and gleam, the pearls, in the slanting light, be opalescent globes, making the sapphires, with which they were mounted, more blue, like deep water at night. Red would also be in the box—from the Burmese ruby sold by Canton traders for many otter skins. Red and gold; emerald green, sapphire blue, pearly softness like light in fog. City night colors, such as she had seen during the traffic halt.

"If you found it," George said, "would you come home with me?"

He waited. . . . At last she said, abruptly: "Oh, yes, I would come. How could I want anything else?"

"Spoken like a Queen's Orphan. The treasure makes no difference, although we may find it." He came to her, lifted one of her hands. The crested jay had dropped again, this time into the old hollow, searching for grubs. "Well," George said, smiling, "here we are. It's a swell world."

The jay began scratching in the mold of the hollow where a giant tree had stood. Its sharp claws made a shrill rasping sound, as if across metal.

Stanton walked to the hollow, where the ancient redwood had decayed, leaving only ancient mold to mark the spot, and the ring of second-growth trees.

The jay flew away abruptly, a chattering streak of blue.

Stanton bent, thrusting his hands into the soft mold and soil where the jay had been. He felt the smoothness of a metal box. Then his exploring fingers found a raised place on the box's top—ornamentation. His fingers told him that ■ metallic bird was embossed on the box—a bird with wide-spread wings—an Imperial Russian eagle.

WHEN he stood up, the girl was watching him, and not what he held in his hands. The finding of the treasure-casket was now as unimportant to her as it was to him, and Stanton realized it.

As he strode toward her, he dropped the box, and one of the old hinges snapped. New color on the earth, like ■ hummingbird's breast, spilled from the box: shimmering blue and emerald green and shining ruby-red. But neither one of them saw it, for George was holding her tightly, and her eyes closed as she raised her lips to his.

Each Man for

From Mr. Chidsey's home in Tahiti comes this colorful novelette of South Sea Island adventure.

By DONALD
BARR CHIDSEY



"He was here a little while ago. Let's look inside."

WAYNE sat on the veranda, and yawned, as he turned the pages of a five-months-old Australian magazine. Avarua was a nice little town, and Rarotonga was a lovely little island—but so dull! He had been there almost a week. With eyes half closed he gazed across the garden, across the road where natives padded along calling softly to one another, across the tiny lagoon, too small even for the tiny anchored freighter. The Pacific was almost white today, with the full smash of the sun upon it.

"Excuse me. Are you the owner of the *Angel*?"

Wayne looked up without animation.

"Yes, I'm the owner of the *Angel*. Why?"

The man was large and blond, with yellow hair, a pinkish complexion, harshly blue eyes. There was something slightly wild about those eyes. The man was middle-aged, but his eyes were ageless—and not good-natured.

"Where you sailing to from here?"

"Back to the Society Islands. Tahiti."

"Not in any hurry, are you?"

"I'm never in any hurry."

"How much would you charge for taking me over to Meaka?"

Wayne looked up in amazement. It wasn't once a year that anybody went to Meaka. Yet this very morning—

"Twelve pound ten, New Zealand."

"I've only got American money. Is that all right?"

"American money is always all right."



Himself

Illustrated by
Percy Leeson

"Uh-huh." Karlsman shot a swift side-wise glance at the young skipper. "He's not going to see Ellis, is he?"

"He said he had some business with Captain Hedsworthy."

"Uh-huh. When will you be ready to go? It won't take me more than a few minutes to settle my hotel bill and get my passport stamped."

Wayne rose, relighting his pipe.

"Just a matter of rounding up my two sailors. Ordinarily that would be easy. I'd simply walk into the noisiest bar in town. But here, where there are no bars—"

"They get the stuff just the same. That orange beer they make—I tried some the other night, and it damn' near blew my eardrums out. Where are these sailors, Captain?"

"That's just what I don't know. Out looking for trouble somewhere, I suppose. I'll start—" He cocked his head. "Oh-oh!"

Down the road from the direction of Avatiu came the wild thud of bare feet, squeals of fright, a bull-like bellowing.

"*Haavare! Haavare! Eiaha oe mai te reira?*"

Wayne vaulted the rail and sped across the lawn.

"Speak of the devil," he cried over his shoulder.

THREE natives flew before Teharuru, and a khaki-clad native policeman clung to his back. Another policeman was just behind this one; and Vanaa, engineer of the *Angel*, who had short legs, was just behind the second policeman. As Wayne tore through the hedge and reached the road, Teharuru stumbled—and both sailors and policemen fell in a cloud of dust.

Teharuru rose, shaking the cop off his back as he might shake off an unwanted scarf. Vanaa got up at the same time as the second cop, and hooked a right and left to the face, which made that cop sit down again very suddenly.

They would have continued pursuit of the fugitives then, these two mad Tahitians, but Wayne Dunlap got in their way.

"Stop it, you apes!"

Fifty dollars even. That is, if you're only going to stay one day."

"I'll only be a few hours, maybe less." The eyes had a far-away look, but it wasn't pleasant. "Just want to see a guy about something."

Now Meaka, one of the smallest of the southern Cook Islands, as Wayne had learned in the course of long, lazy conversations on this very veranda, was inhabited by two hundred-odd natives and three white men. Of the white men one, Captain Hedsworthy, who was Resident Agent, ran the trading establishment. Another was an L.M.S. representative named Lewis, who at the time was on leave attending a missionary conference at Nukualofa. The third, a man named Ellis, nobody seemed to know much about, except that he was an American: he was believed to be an author or something.

"The R.A.?" Wayne asked carelessly.

"No, the other guy."

"I see." Wayne waved a traveler's check until the signature was dry. He folded and pocketed it. The man's name, he had noticed, was Eberhard L. Karlsman. "Funny thing. I've got another passenger for Meaka from here. Mr. McRay. Came in on the mail steamer."



"It's going to be exciting," said McRay.

Grinning, sweating, panting, they faced him. Teharuru was almost twice the size of his cousin Vanaa: otherwise they might have been twins.

"You're drunk again!"

Teharuru, who knew a little English, protested promptly.

"*Non, non*, boss! Jus' one-two drink maybe. Jus' a—"

"Shut up! I say you're drunk!"

Teharuru tilted back a yachting cap on which was lettered in dubious gold: "*Capitaine*." Technically he was captain of the *Angel*, a position Wayne, an American citizen, could not hold, the *Angel* being registered in French Oceania. Actually Teharuru was the mate.

"Okay, boss," he said, still grinning.

Vanaa grinned too, saying nothing.

The cops rose, one by one, dusting their uniforms, glowering, muttering. One of them started to shrill a complaint, but Wayne hushed him.

"All right, all right! I'll go to the magistrate with them." To Vanaa and Teharuru he said: "Come on, you sots! However much it is, it's going to come out of your wages. And what's more, if this happens one more time—just *one more time*—"

"Okay, boss."

They sailed at four o'clock that afternoon and were loafing off Meaka by day-break. . . .

So many things had happened to Wayne Dunlap in the past six months—since the time when, a member of the

nouveau pauvre, stranded in Papeete, he had in a memorable crap game won fifty-one per cent of the little freighter *Angel*—that you might have supposed him a case-hardened old trader. In fact, he was young, earning his living for the first time; he was master of a tidy little ship, and he was madly in love with the South Seas. He called himself a business man, but at heart he was a wanderer. There were still many islands he wished to visit; and one of these was Meaka.

Meaka was commercially insignificant, scientifically famous—of interest only to those to whom rocks are the most important things in life; and it had attracted a succession of learned gentlemen who paid scant heed to the wide-eyed natives, but dashed here and there with little hammers, muttering mysteriously about post-Pliocene limestone, polyps, erosional dissection, calcareous detritus and such-like.

Now, to Wayne Dunlap a reef was a problem in handling, and his only interest in limestone, post-Pliocene or any other kind, was to keep the *Angel* out of its way. Nevertheless he was eager to see Meaka; and at eight bells—he had the early morning watch—permitting Teharuru to slumber on, he strained his eyes for a sight of it.

Most South Sea Islands fall into one of two types: Either they are coral atolls, tiny and flat, surrounded by a more or less circular barrier of reef on which the surf thunders savagely, and looking at a slight distance rather like tin platters stuck with upside-down feather dusters; or else they are volcanic in origin, magnificently mountainous, dark red masses of rock splotched with dark green masses of jungle. In either case there is, immediately, the encircling reef, the dazzling sandy shore, and of course the coconut trees, those gawky yet amazingly graceful palms which flutter a bewildered response to every breeze.

MEAKA was different. It looked less like a tropical isle than a medieval walled city plopped down in the middle of the Pacific. Not Polynesians lived there, you would say, but black-browed jailers who clanked when they walked, and torturers who knew every secret of the rack.

"Odd-looking place, isn't it?"

McRay was wearing a dark gray suit which was not so much out of place as might be supposed; for Meaka is some distance from the equator, and the month was July, which is winter down there.

"Looks like a great wall around the island, doesn't it? Look—you can just see some green hills peeping over the top."

This "wall," Meaka's distinction, was called the "makatea." Roughly, the idea seems to be that the island, a volcano, was originally much higher. Coral over the years had formed a great wall around it, very close. Then the island sank; while the fringing reef, by the same activity, was pushed even higher until it almost shut the mountain from sight.

The makatea was a jagged mass of red rock all cut and slashed into caves. Through Wayne's binoculars they could see great stalactites and stalagmites against which the sea crashed in fury, leaped in geyser-like columns where it found blowholes, and retreating, filled all the air with smoky white spray which glittered in the rising sun. The makatea was from fifty to two hundred feet in height, and anywhere from perhaps one hundred feet to half a mile in width.

"How are you going to locate an anchorage?" McRay asked.

"I'm not even going to try. We'll circle the island slowly, as close in as we dare, until we see some natives putting out in a canoe. Then I'll have the boys heave her to, while we go ashore. There must be *some* little beach where a canoe could land."

"I have an idea it's going to be exciting."

"I have an idea you're right. . . . Excuse me."

He kicked the recumbent Tahitians.

"Come on, Vanaa! I want her at quarter speed—and kept that way. Teharuru! Get up, you lazy Kanaka, and take this wheel!"

They rose, blinking, yawning, grinning apologetically. Drunk or sober, they would ordinarily have fought anybody who spoke to them that way; but they esteemed Wayne Dunlap the finest man in the world, and they delighted to have him bawl them out.

The fourth member of the crew was Mac the Chinaman, whose real name nobody knew, since nobody could ever understand what he said. He was a tiny disconsolate Oriental. A pasty cigarette, seldom lighted, always hung from his lips.

Wayne found him now, the cigarette drooping from his mouth—had he slept with it there?—preparing coffee.

"Okay, Mac."

Mac yammered something, and Wayne went to his own cabin.

It was the first time the *Angel*, which was only one hundred and ten feet over all, had carried two passengers. Wayne had turned his cabin over to them, himself sleeping on deck, where he usually slept anyway when the weather was clear.

He found Karlsman fully dressed except for his coat.

"Oh," said Wayne, pausing in the doorway, looking at the thing Karlsman held. "Going to hunt rats or something?"

Karlsman, half asleep, growled: "One rat, that's all."

"We don't have even one on board."

"There could be one ashore, couldn't there?" He clamped a full clip into the .45 automatic, put it into a holster at his right side, and donned his coat. "What's the matter? I got a right to carry this, haven't I?"

Wayne shrugged.

"If the authorities don't mind, I'm sure I don't. I just came to say there'll be breakfast in a few minutes. We might not be able to go ashore for a while—it's pretty rough; but we've got to be ready to jump at the chance whenever we do get it."

"I'll be ready," Karlsman said grimly.

AT about eight o'clock, a canoe came out for them—one with an enormous outrigger and four paddlers. It was a cockleshell in these seas, to the mercy of which Captain Wayne Dunlap would not dream of intrusting the *Angel's* one lifeboat.

"You're coming with us?"

Wayne said: "Why not? Might as well have a look."

The passengers could not even see the place they were to be taken to; to them, the shore was a lather of foam; but the paddlers never hesitated.

As they grew nearer, it was an ever-changing white wall, and spray stung their faces. Wayne glanced once at McRay, who smiled back. Yes, it was going to be exciting, all right.

The spray increased. They could scarcely see one another, much less the shore, where infuriated water whammed against the jagged rocks and threw itself fifteen or twenty feet into the air. The canoe tilted, jolting erratically. One of the natives dropped his paddle and coolly climbed out on an outrigger support.

A smother of foam. A terrific roar. On the right an upthrust rock, the seas hissing and boiling against its sides, slid past not more than a foot from their elbows. They could no longer see the outrigger, or the boy who clung to it.

The canoe pitched forward, tipped back, straightened as though shaking itself free; and then was slithering across sand. The natives tumbled out, making signs for the passengers to follow, and grasping the outrigger supports, hauled the craft up on a tiny triangle of sand which had not even been visible half a minute before. Baffled, the sea seethed behind them.

Karlsman, no longer pink of face, was white now, and shaky. McRay wrung out his trouser-legs.

"Quite a time," McRay said.

With the natives to guide them, they climbed the makatea. Part of the way was by natural steps worn in the rock, part by steps which had been cut. It was steep; and the cheated sea bellowed its hatred below them all the while.

At the top they found fourteen or fifteen natives in gaudy lava-lavas.

"*Kiaorana*," said Wayne, saluting them.

They cried "*Kiaorana*!" and instantly started to jabber. He stopped them, laughing.

"'*Kiaorana*' is the only word in Cook Islandese I happen to know," he elucidated. "It means '*Hello*.'"

"Let's get going," growled Karlsman.

FROM the top of the makatea the island looked a tropical toyland. The village itself, for all its corrugated iron and unpainted deal board, was undeniably quaint; and the spire of its church thrust itself bravely out of fleecy masses of poinciana.

The inner slope of the makatea was gentler, and they descended by a natural path. Everywhere natives smiled at them, calling "*Kiaorana*!" but they saw no sign of a white man until they came to the village itself, the principal building of which (excepting the church) was a shack over which was a sign: "COOK ISLAND TRADING CO., LTD." Out of this hurried a smallish dark-haired man in sandals, shorts and a shirt; he wore also tortoise-shell glasses, and he carried a huge cork helmet which he clapped almost instantly upon his head.

"Gentlemen! Forgive me for not getting down to meet you—I was tied up with some work here. Come in! Come in!"

He beamed; he shook hands all around.

McRay asked: "Captain Hedsworthy?"

"I am Captain Hedsworthy, yes. Excuse me a moment—" He said something to the natives, who had formed a curious circle, and they fell back, looking disap-

pointed. "Come in! Let me offer you some beer. Medical supplies, you understand? Not very cold, I'm afraid, but—Come in! Come in! Beer first, business afterward."

The shop was dim, and its shelves held the usual trade-goods for far places—calico, scissors, tins of kerosene, flashlights with spare batteries, machetes, sheath-knives, pots and pans, a few bottles of cheap perfume, a few half-rusted cans of food, cigarettes, guitar-strings, mirrors, combs.

"My bush safe. Best we can do here."

He took bottles from a screened box suspended where it would catch the breeze. Draped over this was burlap, and water dribbled upon the burlap from a perforated petrol tin. The idea was that as the water evaporated, coolness came. The beer was at least not downright hot.

"Mighty seldom get visitors. Unexpected pleasure and all that. Wonder what's happened to Ellis? Lives up on the hill. Has a telescope up there, and he's high enough to see over the top of the makatea. Funny he's not here."

"It's Ellis I want to ask about," McRay said quietly.

"Ah, yes. Odd chap. Can't understand him. American. But see here—let me fill them up for you first."

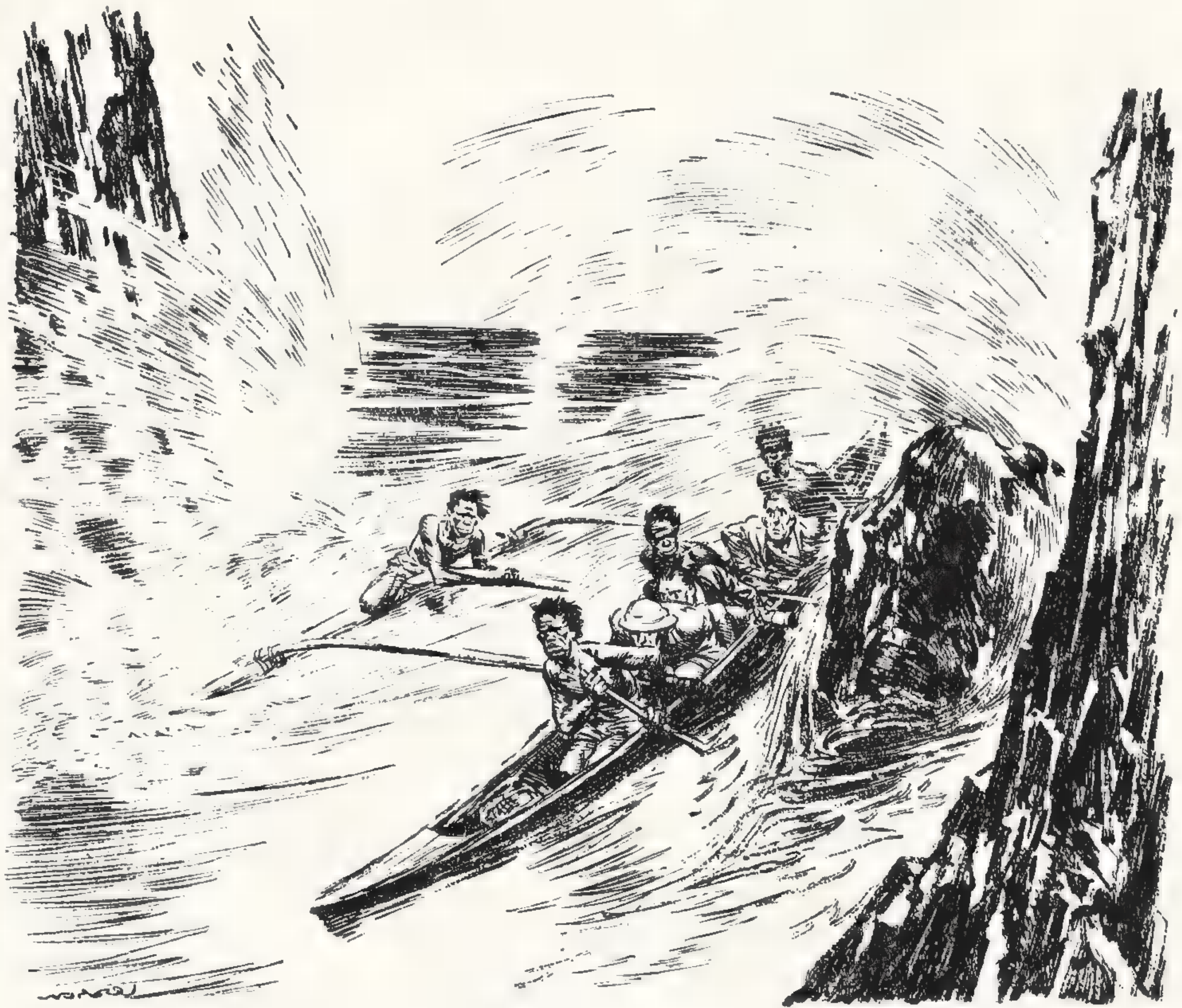
Karlsman muttered, "Excuse me a minute," and slipped out.

Wayne looked after him. Wayne did not like the set of Karlsman's lower jaw, the glint in Karlsman's hard blue eyes; and he hadn't forgotten the .45, or the way Karlsman had looked when Ellis' name was mentioned in Rarotonga.

"Of course I'm curious to know why you're here," Hedsworthy said.

THEY smiled, and Hedsworthy beamed back at them, holding his glass high. Wayne had heard a lot about Captain Hedsworthy, in Rarotonga; and he was puzzled to find so mild-mannered a man. Hedsworthy was a character. An Englishman, he had been in these parts since boyhood. He had survived the hurricane of 1903 in the Tuamotus. He had prospected for gold in the Fiji Islands. He had been in at least two shipwrecks, and had married at least four native women. Now he was a shopkeeper, a king to the population of a remote island, and a rabid amateur deep-sea fisherman.

"Well, I'm here," McRay answered apologetically, "to check up on this man Robert T. Ellis. How long has he been here?"



Spray stung their faces. It was going to be exciting, all right.

"Ellis? Perhaps a year and a half. I really know very little about him. He keeps to himself."

"Does he look anything like this?"

McRay produced a picture, the head and shoulders of a slim blond sullen man on whose coat was pinned a number.

"Why, yes, that's Ellis. Looks younger than he looks now, but it's the same man." Hedsworthy blinked at McRay. "Who are you, may I ask? Are you by any chance a detective?"

"Sort of." McRay found credentials. "United States Post Office Inspection Service. I thought this was the right man, but I wanted to come here first and make sure, before we started extradition proceedings. I've never seen him, myself, but I've got copies of his fingerprints."

"My word!"

Wayne was silent, searching his memory. Suddenly he leaned toward McRay.

"You mean this is *Tertius* Ellis?"

"That's the one. Robert Tertius Ellis. It's taken us a long while to catch up with him."

"Oh," said Wayne.

It had been a swindle of magnificent proportions and astounding simplicity. Tertius Ellis of St. Louis, with his hair-brained scheme of making money out of

nothing, had been compared, and accurately, with Ponzi, with Huckins. Men who would haggle over the price of a cigar, and drive ten miles out of their way to get gasoline at a quarter of a cent less, had pleaded to be permitted to invest in Ellis' patently phony proposition. Why? Because he had paid forty per cent quarterly.

And he *had* paid it—for a little while—using of course the fresh money which flooded in from an ever-increasing horde of investors. Millions had been involved; and nobody ever learned how much Tertius Ellis had salted away. He had been ready for flight when the Post Office people nabbed him. He had been tried, convicted, sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. Then he had escaped.

"So *that's* the man we came here looking for?"

McRay looked up sharply. "We?"

"Karlsman, here—" Wayne looked around, and remembered with a start that Karlsman was not among them. "Well, Karlsman, anyway, told me he was coming here to see Ellis. And I didn't like the look on his face when he said it. What's more—"

He told them about the automatic, and about Karlsman's reference to a rat.

McRay said thoughtfully: "There were thousands ruined, of course, and lots of them were fighting mad about it. Ellis got hundreds of threatening letters. It could be that—"

He paused, nodding thoughtfully.

"Remember any Karlsman among the heavy losers?"

"I'm not sure. There were so many. . . . But it seems to me that there *was* somebody with a name like that. People were driven half-crazy with grief. There were four suicides."

"But how could Karlsman have learned Ellis was out here?"

"The same way we did, I suppose."

"And how was that?"

With perfect politeness McRay ignored this question, turning to Captain Hedsworthy, who seemed a man coming out of a trance.

"Has Ellis ever said anything to you about his past?"

"Good Lord! And to think— Eh? Forgive me. Why, no. He was always very reticent. I knew nothing about him, really."

Wayne said: "Karlsman hasn't come back, and I don't see him outside. I wish I'd brought my revolver from the ship."

"I don't have a gun with me myself," McRay confessed. "Never expected any trouble, of course; and I thought I'd save myself the fuss of being obliged to declare it wherever I stopped."

CAPTAIN HEDSWORTHY rose, called something to a group of natives outside, who answered him by pointing up the hill to where a narrow path wound among banana plants.

Hedsworthy turned back. He looked now more like the stories told of him.

"You're in a British colony, gentlemen, and I'm the Resident Agent. If there's to be any violence, I can assure you that I'm prepared to handle it myself. Excuse me a moment."

He went to the back of the shop. When he returned, he was cramming cartridges into a large Webley revolver.

"We'll go with you," Wayne said.

"As you wish."

The path wandered haphazardly, climbing. Hedsworthy, who took the lead, held the Webley at his side, his thumb on the hammer. Wayne was behind him, then the postal inspector. Below, at a cautious distance, were the ever-curious natives.

At the top of the hill they came upon Ellis' home. The house itself was commonplace, a mere wooden shack with a

rickety veranda and a roof of pandanus thatch; but the location was superb. From it they could see without obstruction the tops of all the trees on the island, the entire makatea, and beyond the makatea the glittering blue Pacific. They could see also—and the incurably romantic Wayne Dunlap thrilled at the sight—the neat gray *Angel* cruising slowly around the island. There wasn't a better ship or a better crew, Wayne thought, in all the world. She was small, yes, but she—

Hedsworthy called: "Ellis?"

There was no answer.

Hedsworthy mounted to the veranda. On it were a chair, a table, a small telescope, a cigar-butt.

"Still warm. He was here a little while ago. Let's look inside."

THERE was only one room, and Hedsworthy moved around it like a comic sleuth, his head low, scowling at things through his tortoise-shell glasses. McRay and Wayne stood in one place, but their eyes were busy. Wayne at last nodded, satisfied; and he went out on the veranda again to gaze at his beloved *Angel* through the telescope.

"See here! Look at this!"

The Resident Agent had been prowling in the kitchen alcove, and he emerged holding a brass shell-casing.

"You said he had an automatic, didn't you, Mr. Dunlap?"

"Yes," said Wayne, "he had an automatic."

"Ellis had no gun here. This Webley of mine is the only firearm on the island. I'm absolutely certain of that. And here we find a shell from an automatic."

He dropped the thing into a pocket.

"Let's look around in back."

He went through the back door like a rabbit diving into its hole. An instant later, before they had a chance to join him, he shouted again.

"Look! Look here!"

There were three unpainted back steps; and on the second were four red round drops.

"If that isn't blood, I'm a coconut! Fresh, too!"

McRay touched one of the drops with the tip of a finger. He sniffed that finger.

"It's blood, all right."

"There are no pigs up here. No dogs. No animals of any kind. Ellis hated 'em. It must be human blood!"

He faced them, eyes flashing behind those deceptive glasses.

"That man Karlsman came up here and murdered Ellis while we were peacefully drinking beer down in the store! And he's dragged the body away somewhere. Well, he won't get far!" He strode around the house, to the clearing in front; and presently he was haranguing the natives loudly, with many gestures. They seemed frightened; when he had finished, they slipped away.

"It's not a large place," Hedsworthy explained, "and these boys know every inch of it. I've given orders that it should be searched from end to end. Also that nobody should be taken out to the ship until I give permission. Damn it, sir! Think of a man killing another man on *my* island!"

"Won't that be dangerous for the natives?"

"I've directed them not to take any chances. When they locate Karlsman, they're to report direct to me at the store."

"And then what?"

"Then," said the Resident Agent, "I'll go and bring him in!"

He led the way back down to the trading establishment.

They sat in the dim place, sipping, seldom talking. From time to time a native would appear and say something to the Resident Agent, who would make a sharp reply, sending him away.

"Too bad you gentlemen don't speak the Cook Islands language. It's much the same as Tahitian, except for the *ng* sound and the fact that they have so many *k*'s."

"The trouble is," said Wayne, "I don't even speak Tahitian."



Wayne heard the beginning of a scream—which was cut short.

"Ah, I see," said the Resident Agent. After about an hour a delegation appeared, and the spokesman addressed Hedsworthy at length.

Hedsworthy cursed.

"They say that they can't find Ellis or Karlsman anywhere. But there's one place they haven't looked. They say they have, but they're lying. They're all afraid to go there. It's supposed to be haunted. These beggars," Hedsworthy explained, "are all good Christians, on the record sheet, and they go to church on Sunday and all that—when Lewis is here to conduct services; he's on leave just now. But all the same, they've never forgotten their old gods. They believe in playing safe. They think this particular place is haunted, and they wouldn't go there for anything in the world. So *that* must be where Ellis and Karlsman are."

Wayne asked: "Why should Karlsman drag Ellis' body away?"

"To dump it over the makatea. When that sea and those rocks get a man between them, they're not likely to leave enough to constitute a *corpus delicti*; and without a *corpus delicti* you can't convict of murder."

"How far away is this place?"

"Not far. But I'd rather you gentlemen waited for me here. It's a nasty climb, and we've had enough trouble already today."

He made a brief bow, and stalked out.

McRAY looked at Wayne, who was staring after the R.A.

"We can't let him walk into a spot like that alone!"

"Certainly not," said Wayne. "Come on."

They caught up with Hedsworthy on top of the makatea. He seemed annoyed, but he shrugged.

"As you wish. But please be very careful. Because of that blowhole, the spray gets very high here, and it's usually wet the whole distance. All right."

Without hesitation or another word he started down what seemed at first the sheer side of a cliff. Following him, they found small natural niches irregularly spaced, but at best it was a risky task. The blowhole Hedsworthy had mentioned was the most forceful that Wayne, who had seen many, had ever seen. A billion waves, thundering in through uncounted years, forcing themselves underneath a natural platform of rock, had found a weak spot in the ceiling formed by that rock; they had pounded it mercilessly and without pause, at last punching a hole through the overhang; up into this hole, scarcely the size of your hand, thousands of gallons of sea water were forced at terrific pressure every time a wave came in. This water rose screaming in a solid column, like a geyser. It stood a moment, its peak shattered into drops so tiny that they resembled a cloud of steam; and then it fell in whatever direction the wind pushed it, to be immediately afterward replaced by another column as another wave came in.

The wind this day each time pushed it full and fair against the cliff that Hedsworthy, McRay and Wayne Dunlap descended. From the first few steps, though they were fifty feet or more above sea-level, they were drenched with brine. It hissed in their ears; it stung their faces, blinded their eyes. When they reached



the platform of rock in which the blowhole itself was located, they were panting, gasping, soaked, sore, bruised.

Oddly enough, though they were near the water now, there was less spray here; and between uprisings from the blowhole, which were deafening, it was possible for them to converse in only moderate shouts. Just below them the waves rolled back and forth. Above, the periodic column appeared, wavered, broke, toppled and was gone. On two sides rose sheer cliff; on a third side the raging sea, facing this a tiny square of sand and a small natural cave with stalactic ceiling.

"This is what's haunted," Hedsworthy cried in an interval.

They would have preferred to rest for a moment, but he slid over the edge of the platform and made his way by hands and feet, elbows and knees, to the sand. They followed him.

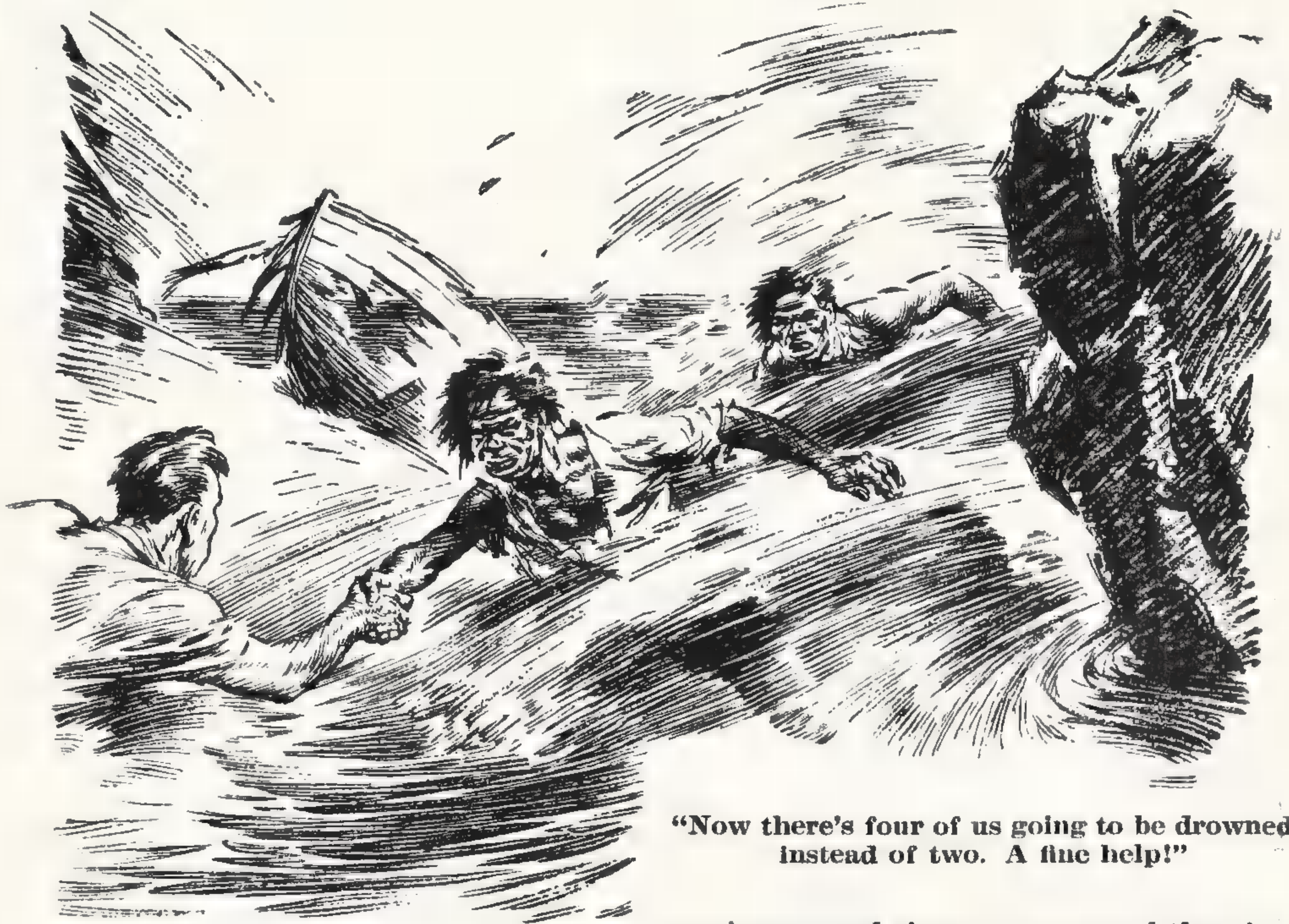
FROM the beach they could look up into the little cave. It was empty. They went into it, stooping, and peered inanely around the stalactites. No, it was indisputably empty.

Here the thunder of the sea was even less than on the platform. Talking in loud voices, they could hear one another all the time.

"They're not here!" the R.A. cried.

"Obviously," said McRay.

"The only part of the island that wasn't searched," Hedsworthy cried. "The an-



"Now there's four of us going to be drowned instead of two. A fine help!"

swer must be either that Karlsman got rid of Ellis' body and then slipped and fell over the makatea himself, or else that as he was being pushed over, Ellis revived a bit and pulled his murderer with him."

"Maybe Karlsman committed suicide," McRay suggested.

"Maybe. We'll never find his body, if he did. Or Ellis' either. See here: it's more dangerous going up again than it was coming down. I'm used to it, but I don't want to see anything happen to you chaps. Wait here until I can get a rope for you."

He started away. Wayne Dunlap put out an arm, stopping him.

"I have another explanation," said Wayne.

Impatiently: "Yes? What is it?"

"I believe you're an Englishman, Captain Hedsworthy?"

"I am. What in the world has that got to do with—"

"And yet," Wayne interrupted evenly, "four times I've heard you say '*will*,' where an Englishman would say '*shall*,' three times I've heard you say '*would*' where an Englishman would say '*should*,' twice you've used the word '*funny*,' meaning what an Englishman would mean by '*strange*' or '*singular*' or '*odd*.' Also you referred to being 'tied up with work,' you've repeatedly called your shop a 'store,' and in spite of a noble effort,

you've several times pronounced '*been*' as '*bin*.' Another thing—"

"Damn it, sir! I've associated with Americans from time to time, and I may have picked up a few of their expressions, but what the devil has that got to do with—"

"Another thing: Could I see that shell casing you said you found in Ellis' house?"

"Certainly! I've got it right here in this pock— No, damn it! I seem to've lost it."

"Oh, no, you haven't," Wayne said pleasantly, and reached into that pocket and took it out. "You didn't give us much of a look at this thing, but I thought it was a .38. Yes, I see now that it is. There's the mark of the firing-pin, all right. It's been fired. But not in an automatic. Otherwise you'd be able to see the little scratch the ejector makes when it throws the shell out. No, this hasn't been fired from Karlsman's forty-five. But it might have been fired from that Webley of yours."

He pocketed the casing.

"That cut you've got on the back of your left wrist—the one you've been so anxious to keep us from seeing—that was made with your own penknife just a little while ago, wasn't it? Those drops on Ellis' doorstep were blood, all right; but they were perfectly round, spattering out evenly in all directions. If they'd been dropped from a body being carried, they

would have been pear-shaped and spattered from the tails."

He snatched off the sun helmet. He turned to McRay.

"Notice how he's kept this thing on even when he was in the shade, even in the store, where he would have been cooler without it? Well, there's the reason. Black hair, but yellow at the base. Dyed. And it was growing out. He wanted us to see the black hair, but he didn't want us to have a close look. As for the glasses,—he snatched them,—"they're probably—yes, they are. Just common ordinary window-glass."

He put the glasses into the helmet and handed it back.

"What you told those natives, and what they answered, I don't know. You were sure neither of us would understand, so you could give almost any kind of order to make it look as though they were doing what you told us you'd commanded them to do. Never mind that now. What I really want to know, Mr. Ellis, is this: *What did you do with Captain Heds-worthy?*"

WHAT followed was entirely Wayne's fault. He should have been ready. He should have known that a man who faced life imprisonment if he was taken to the States would not submit tamely to arrest. Wayne was a bigger man than Robert Tertius Ellis, and both he and McRay were younger, stronger. He had fooled Ellis neatly, and trapped him. But he had been too cocky.

Ellis lurched toward him, and a foot slipped between Wayne's ankles, a hand pushed his shoulder. The floor of the cave was wet. Wayne slipped, falling against McRay, and they fell together.

Ellis vanished like a shadow. For a man who must have been near fifty, he was amazingly swift. By the time Wayne had scrambled to his feet and staggered to the mouth of the cave, Ellis was on the rock platform and racing for the lowest of the niches leading up the makatea. Wayne ran after him, yelling. McRay ran after Wayne.

Ellis climbed fastest. He knew the way, and he had desperation to lend him speed. Twice, looking up as he climbed, Wayne caught filmy glimpses of him. Again they were drenched in spray. Again the geyserlike column thrown up through the blowhole was falling upon them with maddening monotony.

At the top Ellis did not make off in panic, as Wayne had expected. Instead

he whipped out the Webley and shouted over the edge in an interval between shrieks of the blowhole:

"Go back, or I'll shoot!"

Wayne looked up at the muzzle of the revolver, perhaps fifteen feet above. He couldn't see it very well, because of the spray; and he didn't believe it. He was sore clear through.

"All right, let's see you shoot," he cried, and climbed higher.

The thing exploded. Even above the roar of the waves and the scream of the blowhole, it sounded sharp and hard. Something clacked against the cliff not half an inch from Wayne's left ear, and shards of rock peppered his face.

He paused. He saw Ellis' thumb draw back the hammer for a second shot.

From just below him came McRay's voice:

"I'm going back down."

Wayne Dunlap stared a moment into the muzzle of the pistol, into the fiery brown eyes beyond. He rubbered out his lips, shook his head. He was still sore—but he was not insane.

"So am I," he muttered, and started to climb down.

When they stood again on the tiny beach, panting, Ellis for no apparent reason fired a second shot. The bullet slapped the edge of the rock platform and ricocheted into the sea, but it had passed close enough so that they heard its angry chopped-off song.

"*He's gone nuts!*"

THEY ran for the cover of the cave, hearing a third shot as they did so. They never learned where that one went. Bruised, exhausted, as wet now with sweat as with brine, they dropped on the floor of the cave; and for a long time after that they were silent.

"Wasn't *I* the bright one?" gritted Wayne at last. "We could have had him if I'd tipped you off and we'd both jumped at once."

"Well, it's happened."

McRay was not perturbed. Wayne was coming more and more to like and admire this small amiable man who couldn't be rattled. There was no swank in McRay; he knew he was in a bad spot, and he was serious about it; but he remained perfectly cool.

"You see, I never did see Robert Tertius Ellis myself," he confessed. "I'd studied his picture, of course, but what are pictures? I wasn't supposed to have this assignment, but the inspector who was, who

knew Ellis thoroughly, had to stay in the States to testify in an important case, so at the last minute they switched me over. I've got to admit he fooled me beautifully."

"Perfectly natural mistake," asserted Wayne. "He saw us coming, recognized Karlsman, and thought fast."

"Where is Karlsman, do you suppose?"

Wayne shrugged.

"Lord knows! Ellis couldn't have polished him off, anyway, because we were with Ellis all the time after Karlsman left the store. And it's impossible to believe that he could have got one of the natives to do the job. These natives simply aren't murderers. What I want to know," Wayne added, "is where Captain Hedsworthy is."

"Not here anyway, or else dead, I should guess. Otherwise even Ellis probably wouldn't dare to take such a chance."

"And why did Ellis come here? I think he must have known we'd follow him. He must have deliberately planned to get us down here. But why? We could climb back."

"We can't climb back with him holding the pass."

"No, but he can't stay up there indefinitely. What about Karlsman? Ellis must be planning to go after him sooner or later. Knowing the island the way he does, he'd be able to sneak up behind Karlsman and shoot him. Then, since Karlsman's armed, Ellis might get out of it on a self-defense plea."

"Not while we're alive to testify against him."

"That's just it. That's just what I can't understand; I don't see why he lured us down here."

Wayne sighed, lowering his head. He was seated now, his arms on his knees. For some time he stared glumly at the floor of the cave.

McRAY said, very quietly: "I think I begin to see why."

"Why what?"

"Why he wanted to get us here. He's going to save his ammunition for Karlsman. Look at the beach—what's left of it."

Wayne looked; and something inside his chest became cold and hard and tight.

The tide was coming in. There could be not the slightest doubt of this. It was coming in fast. There had never been more than a few feet of sand exposed, and now this had practically disappeared. The waves indeed were reach-

ing up almost to where Wayne and McRay sat—reaching eagerly, gloatingly, and with confidence. The cave was only a few feet high, and no corridor led from it. The walls on both sides of the beach were sheer. In half an hour, perhaps an hour—

"My God! He can't do *that*!"

Wayne rushed out, splashing water, to the base of the platform-like rock which contained the blowhole. The great white hissing column had just collapsed again, and through the spray he saw Ellis far above—saw Ellis grin, lifting the revolver. He pointed frantically toward the sea. He heard the revolver explode. He saw fragments of rock fly into the air at the edge of the platform near his head.

NOW a breaker crashed in, and water shrieked through the blowhole, blotting Ellis from sight. Wayne, who had been ankle-deep, found himself knee-deep. The wave was cruelly strong. It threw him off balance, and he fell to hands and knees. Its undertow almost swept him out into the open ocean.

He staggered up as it receded. He looked again toward the top of the makatea. The white column swayed, broke, fell crippled against the cliff—and through its steamlike residue Wayne saw that Karlsman had arrived.

Karlsman was laughing; he had caught Ellis from behind. He was twisting Ellis' right arm, so that the Webley was useless. He slapped Ellis on the side of the head with his huge automatic. He kicked Ellis in the middle of the back.

Wayne saw the fugitive pitch over the verge like a man taking a well-planned dive. He saw that Ellis' mouth was open wide, like his eyes, and Wayne thought he could even see the horror in those eyes. Wayne heard the beginning of a scream—which was cut short.

The blowhole cut that scream short. The Pacific came whamming in; the great column rose majestically, loudly. And Robert Tertius Ellis? Just for an instant, before the wave threw him off balance again, Wayne saw Ellis. He saw him falling, saw the geyser rise to meet him; saw Ellis, beaten out of human form, thrown upward, twirled around and around like a bundle of firewood caught in a hurricane.

But this was only for an instant. Then Wayne was down, coughing, spitting sand and sea-water. The Pacific had grabbed him firmly this time, and it was determined to take him back to its own green



He had run amok. Now he would kill everybody else he could.

blue depths. He knew what was happening, but he seemed to have no will to resist. Let the water have him: it was stronger than he was: why fight?

Something had his shoulders and was yanking him to his feet. He stumbled, but was held up.

"Make it fast! There's another one coming!"

Waist-deep now, supported by McRay, he staggered back to the cave and threw himself on its floor as another wave swept up. This one penetrated the cave itself with several inches of swirling water.

"Won't be many more," Wayne muttered. "Did you see—it?"

"Yes. I saw him come down. God, what a way— Look! There he is now!"

It was the first time McRay had shown excitement. He was pointing. Wayne looked.

What had been Robert Tertius Ellis was dangling inexplicably—for there was no visible ledge or support—against the very side of a pinnacle of rock. Certainly the spine was broken, probably both legs and both arms as well. The thing simply had no human shape. They recognized it only by the lumpy shredded clothing.

Water sprang upon that rock pinnacle, whitening it from sight. Water swished confidently into the cave, swished away again. The next time. . . . As Wayne had said, there wouldn't be many more.

Somehow that hideous thing—when the sea fell away and left swift streamlets upon the pinnacle like so many careless chalk marks—that thing miraculously and senselessly kept its place.

From above they heard two shots. Not the Webley's brittle crack this time, but the hollow cannonlike boom of a forty-five.

The thing on the pinnacle jerked twice, slipped a little, but did not tumble. Another furious sea swept over it.

"It's Karlsman! He must be stark mad, shooting at a corpse! Kill-crazy!"

"He's a fine shot," observed McRay.

When they could see the pinnacle of rock again, the thing no longer clung to it. This time the Pacific had claimed its own.

But they saw something else. In the immediate excitement they had not previously looked out toward the horizon, and therefore they had not seen the *Angel* cruising a short distance offshore. They did not see the *Angel* now, for she was no longer there—which made what they did see appear even more extraordinary.

Not one hundred yards away, teetering on the crest of a wave, flashing valiantly white in the sun, was a boat rowed by two brown men. It was making for the cave.

They saw it only for an instant, before it disappeared into a trough, but that instant was enough. Wayne had not of course seen the faces of the rowers, but even from their backs, even at that distance, there could be no mistaking the small knotty Vanaa, the gigantic Teharuru.

They were Tahitians, and had spent their lives in or on the water. But even if

they were the two best boatmen in the world, Wayne Dunlap knew, they could not make a landing in this pocket of rocks; for the beach simply was not there any more, the sand wasn't visible even when the waves receded.

He stepped out of the cave, stood at its mouth, legs spread, arms waving frantically. He would signal them to turn back.

The tiny craft appeared again, an egg-shell, a chip of white wood. Vanaa, at the bow oars, turned in his seat, apparently to pick the best place to land. He must have seen Wayne, for he waved gayly in reply. Then he bent to his oars again, and the boat came on in.

McRay pulled Wayne back into the cover of the cave.

"He'll shoot you! He's gone completely mad up there!"

"*They've* gone completely mad," Wayne said. "Good God! There isn't a chance in the world that—"

It was too late now. The *Angel's* dinghy was beyond the control of even such muscles and skill as the two Tahitians possessed. It was seized, lifted, hurled against that same pinnacle of rock on which recently Ellis' broken body had been plastered. Both oars on that side were splintered like toothpicks.

It caromed off, disappeared, rose into sight again—and was smashed against the pinnacle a second time, becoming match-wood.

For a moment the men in the cave could see nothing but water and foam. Then the head of Teharuru appeared, and Teharuru's great brown arms flashed in the sun. How that man could swim!

Then Vanaa, just behind him.

They fought. They were lifted high, thrown back. White lacy crests blanketed their heads, blotting these from sight, but the heads appeared again, and the bold strong arms never ceased to stroke. Bits of the dinghy's wreckage floated past them, sometimes struck them; they paid no heed. Inch by inch, all the while fighting the ancient enemy-friend of their race, they got closer to the shore.

WAYNE could endure it no longer. He seized one of McRay's hands, and McRay, understanding, held to a stalactite with the other. Wayne, waist-deep, reached out as far as he could. He was beyond the shelter of the cave now.

Little Vanaa made it first. His eyes were bloodshot; his left temple had been cut by a piece of driftwood, and blood

streamed from it; but his grand wide grin never faltered. Wayne spun him toward McRay, who with a shoulder butted him into the stalactite, and around this Vanaa threw both arms.

As he reached out for Teharuru, Wayne heard the automatic roar, but if the bullet struck near him he was not aware of it.

Even in the cave the footing was precarious. Water swirled around them, anywhere from their knees to above their waists, and it was getting higher with every wave. But at least they had stalactites; and as they clung to these, Wayne in a nervous rage of reaction cursed his crew for nitwits. He fairly screeched at them—and they grinned, bobbing apologetically.

"Okay, boss," Vanaa said: it was his only English, and he had learned it from his cousin.

"Okay, boss," parroted Teharuru. "We look wit' glasses at big jump-water, an' we see you. See man shoot at you. We come close as we can, t'en come in boat. We don't let no man shoot at you."

"A fine lot of help you've been! Now there's four of us going to be drowned instead of two! Where the hell is the ship, anyway?"

VANAA and Teharuru, buffeted by waves while they clung to the limestone, stared back in the direction from which they had come. Undeniably the *Angel* was not in sight.

"Damfool Chinaman! We tell him stan' by! Where he go?"

"Damfool *you*!" retorted Wayne.

The grin had faded from the giant's face. Vanaa was still grinning, for he didn't understand much English; but Teharuru's large liquid eyes were plaintive as he looked at Wayne.

"I sorry, boss. Vanaa-me, we see *man* shoot at you, so we come. We don't want nobody hurt you, boss."

"All right, all right," Wayne said gruffly. "It was a foolish thing to do, just the same."

"Sure," cried Teharuru, grinning again, happy as a dog when its master smiles.

"Sure! Vanaa-me, alway damfool."

"Sure," said Wayne.

The Tahitians indeed were getting the worst of it now, since one was the tallest, the other the shortest of the quartet. Even Vanaa was not able to stand upright, and the great Teharuru was obliged to bend over so far that his head was lower than those of the white men. In consequence

every wave splashed water over their faces, stinging their eyes.

But nobody was comfortable. And nobody, not even the beaming Vanaa, nor the calm McRay, was unaware of the fact that if they remained in this place much longer, they would be drowned.

From where they crouched they could see the edge of the rock platform and the base of the blowhole column, which still appeared and disappeared, each time emitting its horrid hoarse scream.

PRESENTLY Wayne said: "Here's what I suggest—and Teharuru, pass this on to Vanaa: When it gets so bad that we can't stay here any longer, let's make a break for that platform over there. Every man for himself, let's understand *that*. If one tries to help another, it will only mean they'll both go under. We couldn't stay on that platform even now, the way it is, and we certainly won't be able to in a little while. So we'll run across it and start climbing the cliff, in any order we happen to get there. *Nobody looks back! Understood?*"

Teharuru and McRay nodded, and when Teharuru interpreted for his cousin that indefatigable little Tahitian nodded too, grinning broader than ever.

"Of course," McRay added in a matter-of-fact voice, "unless he's gone away or fallen asleep, which isn't likely, he'll get one or two of us anyway. Maybe all of us."

"Of course," Wayne agreed. "But at least it's better than just staying here and doing a rats-in-the-trap act."

"Oh, absolutely," said McRay.

They were silent for a while; and indeed, they needed all their strength and wind to keep their positions and hold to the stalactites. The waves bruised and battered them, threw them against one another, knocked them off their feet again and again. The water was only moderately cool, but the white men had been in it for at least two hours, the Tahitians only a little less; and their teeth were chattering. Their muscles, because of the cramped position and the constant need to push this way and that against the surge of the sea, were stiff and sore. And still the water rose.

McRay's reserve broke.

"Hell," he cried, "let's go now and get it over with! Why stick around here and wait till the last second?"

"All right," said Wayne; and Teharuru nodded, and so did Vanaa, who got the idea from the expressions on their faces.

"I'll count three," Wayne announced. "And remember—each man for himself. Nobody helps anybody else. It's the only way."

He drew a deep breath, steadying his feet. He fastened his gaze on the platform of rock out of which the geyser rose.

"One—"

Vanaa and Teharuru were staring at him. He shook his head, nodding toward the platform to indicate that they were to think only of it.

"Two—"

An especially high comber thundered in, filling the cave with water clear up to the ceiling. They were spitting and spewing when it fell back.

"Three!"

Wayne obeyed his own orders. He did not look behind; nor did he look right or left. His face in the water, he crawl-stroked furiously.

When he reached the platform, he could not have seen any of the others had he tried, for a great wave had just struck it, and the spray was harsh and fine, almost gritty like sand. The column appeared, screaming, at the blowhole.

He scrambled up on the platform before the wave receded. He ran across it, and found the bottom niches more by feel than by sight. He started to climb.

From the time he left the cave he had not seen anything except what was within a foot or two of his nose—and sometimes not even that. Now, his face almost scraping the cliff, he felt for niches with hands and feet, and tried to think only of the climbing.

He *tried* to do this.

Where were the others? Below him—or above him? And was Karlsman waiting up there, already peering down through the mist, already drawing a bead on Wayne's head?

HE must not think of these things. He climbed. Up and up. It was incredible that he had not reached the top: he had come twice as high as he'd expected, yet the cliff was against his face still.

The temptation was too great. He lifted his head. And he saw Karlsman.

The pinkish face, the hard blue eyes, were a scant four feet above him; and a few inches nearer yet was the black muzzle of the gun. Karlsman was laughing, his mouth open—the laugh of a madman! He had run amok; he had killed the one he'd come to kill, and now he would kill everybody else he could. He thought this was very funny, so he laughed.

Then he disappeared. He seemed to be jerked backward. And even through the hoarse scream of the blowhole, which at this moment erupted again, Wayne heard a bellow of indignation.

"See here! What the devil are you doing with a pistol on my island? Why, you damned—"

The gun exploded, cannonlike.

"—will teach you! Comin' to my island like some damned American cinema gangster!"

Wayne struggled further, finding additional strength. He crawled over the top. He stood there swaying.

"And who are *you*, sir, if I may ask?" the bellowing voice demanded.

Glaring at him was a short, thick man, not young. His face was dark red, almost purple; his eyes were hazel and very bright; he had a white military mustache. The automatic was in his left hand, loosely held. At his feet, senseless, was Karlsmann.

"Can't speak, eh? Damned outrage! Comin' here climbin' all over, shootin' in all directions!"

He strode to the verge, looked over.

"Three more, eh? All comin' up. Well, it's time I had an explanation! Interruptin' my fishin' like this! Outrage!" He swung toward Wayne. "*You!* Don't you know it's dangerous down there?"

Wayne blubbered: "It—it is a bit dangerous, isn't it?" Then he collapsed.

THAT night they had dinner on deck. They were taking it easy, a bare seven knots. Teharuru, the cap with the golden "*Capitaine*" tipped back on his head, had the wheel. Near him sat Vanaa, softly playing a mouth-organ. McRay and Wayne sat on top of the cabin, and Mac handed their plates up to them. The only real chair aboard was occupied, noisily, by Captain Eric Burgess Hedsworthy, Resident Agent of Meaka, who had decided that such an extr'ord'n'ry damned outrageous outrage merited not merely a written but a personal report to his immediate superior at Rarotonga. Besides, Captain Hedsworthy wished to replenish his beer supply. That rascal Ellis had given away or drunk most of the bottles left in the shop. And had done this while impersonating him—*him*, Eric Burgess Hedsworthy!—of all the damned outrages!

"*There's* the only one of you with a grain of common sense," cried Captain Hedsworthy, pointing to Mac, who with a cigarette drooping from his lips, and

with an air of patient boredom, was passing out forks. "Never could make out what the blighter was talkin' about, but he impressed me as a man who knew something. I was fishin', but when he spoke to me, I knew it was a case of all hands. Didn't even wait to let me clamber aboard. Simply threw a line and off we went, with me and the four boys in the sailin' canoe bobbin' about in the wake like an aquaplane!"

Wayne explained: "As near as we can figure it, Mac saw a lot of natives on another part of the makatea—they wouldn't go anywhere near the part just above the cave, of course; and they were signaling wildly to him, pointing northward. This was just after these two Tahitian numskulls here had pushed off, leaving Mac orders to stand in as close as possible. Well, he used his head and disobeyed those orders. He'd seen the signaling natives through my binoculars, and he looked the way they pointed and made out your canoe. . . . The natives didn't know what the matter was, but they knew that *something* was wrong, and they wanted you brought back. Mac didn't know what the matter was, either, but he acted fast. He made for you full steam, and brought you back."

"Bobbin' around like an aquaplane," Captain Hedsworthy repeated. "Never had such a ride in my life!"

"She can do fourteen knots," Wayne said proudly.

"And I come back and find Ellis has been impersonating me, and him and this man tied up below—this Karls-whatever-his-name-is—there they'd been, shootin' off pistols all over my island! Like a couple of blasted American gangsters, eh? Shootin' in all directions! Reminds me of a time in Sarawak when I was—"

He broke off, glaring at Teharuru. The English conversation had been too speedy for Teharuru, who had given up trying to understand. Now he was watching a rising moon and singing more loudly than he realized, to the tune his cousin played on the mouth organ.

WAYNE threw a piece of bread at him, to catch his attention.

"Teharuru! Watch your course! And stop making so much noise!"

"Okay, boss."

"I said," resumed Captain Eric Burgess Hedsworthy, "it reminds me of a time when I was in Sarawak. Hot day it was, and wet, and along in the afternoon this chap Chennenby—"

ONE MORE

WADE LEWIS was just swinging the car north on the main road into Fulton when the girl beside him cried, "Look!" and a tremendous red glare of fire began to tower and mushroom out against the clouds in the rainy night sky to the west.

Wade said a short but fervent oath and jammed on the brakes as he yanked the wheel over. He went out of the turn from second into high with the throttle wide open, and held it there because he knew that the fire was oil, and that it was dangerously close to his own drilling-rig at the K2.

For five miles along the highway neither of them spoke, and the man played with the thin hope that it was only one of Metropolitan's sumps going up in the field beyond his own; but by the time they had made the turn-off and crossed the Ajax hills, the flame was jetting up in a single great plume, and he knew there was hell to pay. He knew that the new well, a hundred yards from the K2 derrick, had blown in a gusher and was on fire. That meant that the chances of saving his rig were worth just about a damn a dozen and every cent he had was sunk in that four-thousand-foot hole.

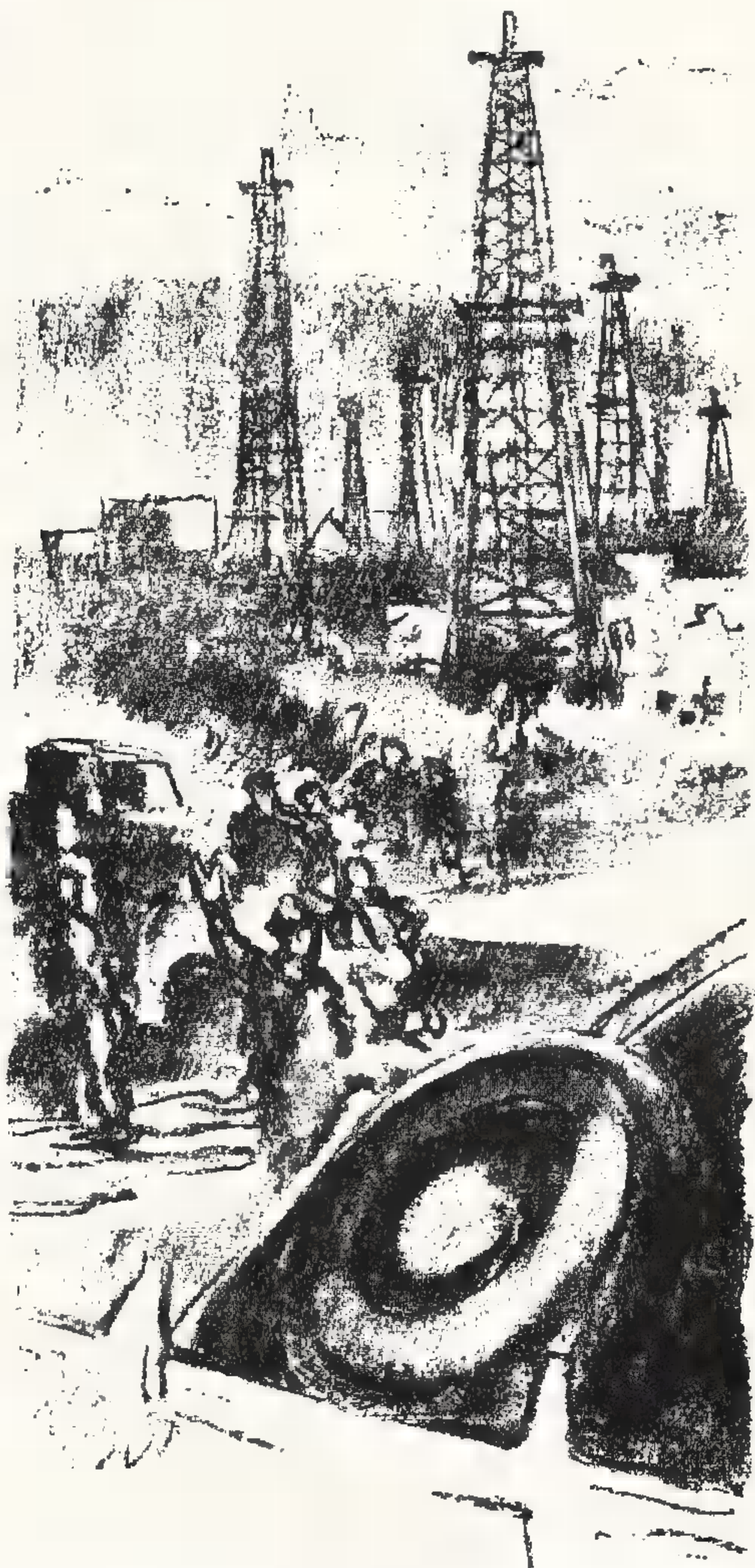
At the bottom of the hills where the road leveled off, they had to slow down. A week of rain had soaked the flats into a gumbo that would suck a car down hub-deep if they slipped from the two graveled tracks.

Wade snatched an instant to look at the girl beside him. She was bracing herself against the dash with both hands, and her face looked tight and strained in the glare. Jane Miller was only twenty-three, but she knew all about oil-fires. She knew them and feared them with an aching fear that only pain can bring, for she had lost her father in the great Black Lady fire two years before.

Wade Lewis had been a heat-monkey in her father's suppression-crew then, and it had been because of Jane that he had quit that and turned to drilling. Jane had admitted that she loved him so much it hurt, but she wouldn't marry a man who would some day be brought home charred and dead. Wade knew what was in her mind now as they went lurching

He was a heat man. And though he had promised not to risk the inferno of a blazing well again, this was a special case.

Illustrated by
Grattan Condon



through the storm toward that great tower of flame. He knew she was thinking of his promise never to put on an asbestos suit and go in under another fire.

Wade wished that there were something he could say to reassure her, something that would ease the pain that the

FIRE

By
RALPH
CONDON



"Kid," he said, "I've got to go into this fire. You'll have to make a hole in that promise of mine."

sight, or even the mention of fires, always brought to her fine gray eyes. But he couldn't find any words for that, so he spoke the fury that was in his mind for the neighboring driller:

"That damned fool, Chandler! He's been through the rock into shale for three days, but he wouldn't pump enough mud down his casing to hold the pressure in a toy balloon! Of all the swell-headed boobs—"

His wrath choked him then, and he swung the car off into the graveled yard behind the K2 toolhouse.

THE men of his drilling-crew were heaving mud on the roofs and against the walls of the sheds as a protection against the growing heat; and Wade Lewis saw where they had built a low sandbag wall around his derrick in the hope of blocking off the wash of oil that would be carried over on a tide of water as soon as Chandler's two hydraulic streams overflowed his sump.

Wade kicked open the door and slid out, unmindful of the soot and rain that came driving down on his well-cut clothes. For a moment he stood bareheaded, his face turned up into the glaring heat of the fire.

Chandler's derrick was already burned down, a few of the charred beams blazing across the surface of the sludge-pond to make a lighter-colored flame.

The main fire, though, went screaming up two hundred feet to swirl and throw its light back from the low-hung clouds. Banners of flame squirted out of the smoke, came spilling and twisting down like wicked, living things, and then were caught in the roaring suction and hurled to the sky again.

Wade felt Jane's shoulder against his, and said grimly above the thunder of the thing:

"When that guy builds a fire, he builds a good one!"

Bud Bell, the night foreman, came running up then. His eyebrows were soot, and his face showed red and seared through the black. He flung out his hands and yelled:

"It's too damn' hot! It's too hot in there. We tried to lay in enough bags to hold back his floating fire, but it'll burn you down—the oil's going to wash right into our rigging as soon as he hoses his sump level up another foot!"

"Then tell him to shut down his pumps," Wade Lewis barked. "He can't scratch a fire like that with a couple of

two-inch streams—not if he had fifty times his pressure!"

"Tell him—" Bud screamed, and then bit off a rush of profanity as he remembered Jane. "You can't tell that screw-ball a thing! I tried, and he chased me off his place!"

"Maybe he needs some more telling," Wade said bluntly, and stood calculating the fire a moment more before he decided. "From the look of things, they've got about three feet of casing above the sump, and she's blowing clean enough so a guy might be able to slap a valve-coupling on her. If those guys would shut down their water, they could get in there and stop that baby before they burn up the whole field!"

Bud Bell shook his head doubtfully.

"I don't know, Wade. They've had better'n four feet of rain-water all the way around the jet before they started hydraulicking, and they'd have no place to throw it even if they tried to pump out for a go-devil. That hole's drilled right in the lowest place."

"I WASN'T figuring to pump her out," Wade said, and kept his eyes away from Jane. "I was figuring on a boat. My old tin gondola is down at the Metropolitan's main yard a couple of miles away."

Bell's face set as he wagged his head in protest.

"Good God, Wade, that pond's no place for a boat-ride! There's inches of oil on top, and she'll go like powder the first time the draft lets one of those fire streamers down!"

"If and when it lets one down," Wade said. "In the meantime, we aint going to stand waiting like dopes, to be burned out! Phone Metro and get that boat and a hinge-valve here quick! I'll talk to Chandler and have the water shut down—we can start getting some lines rigged in before the gondola comes!"

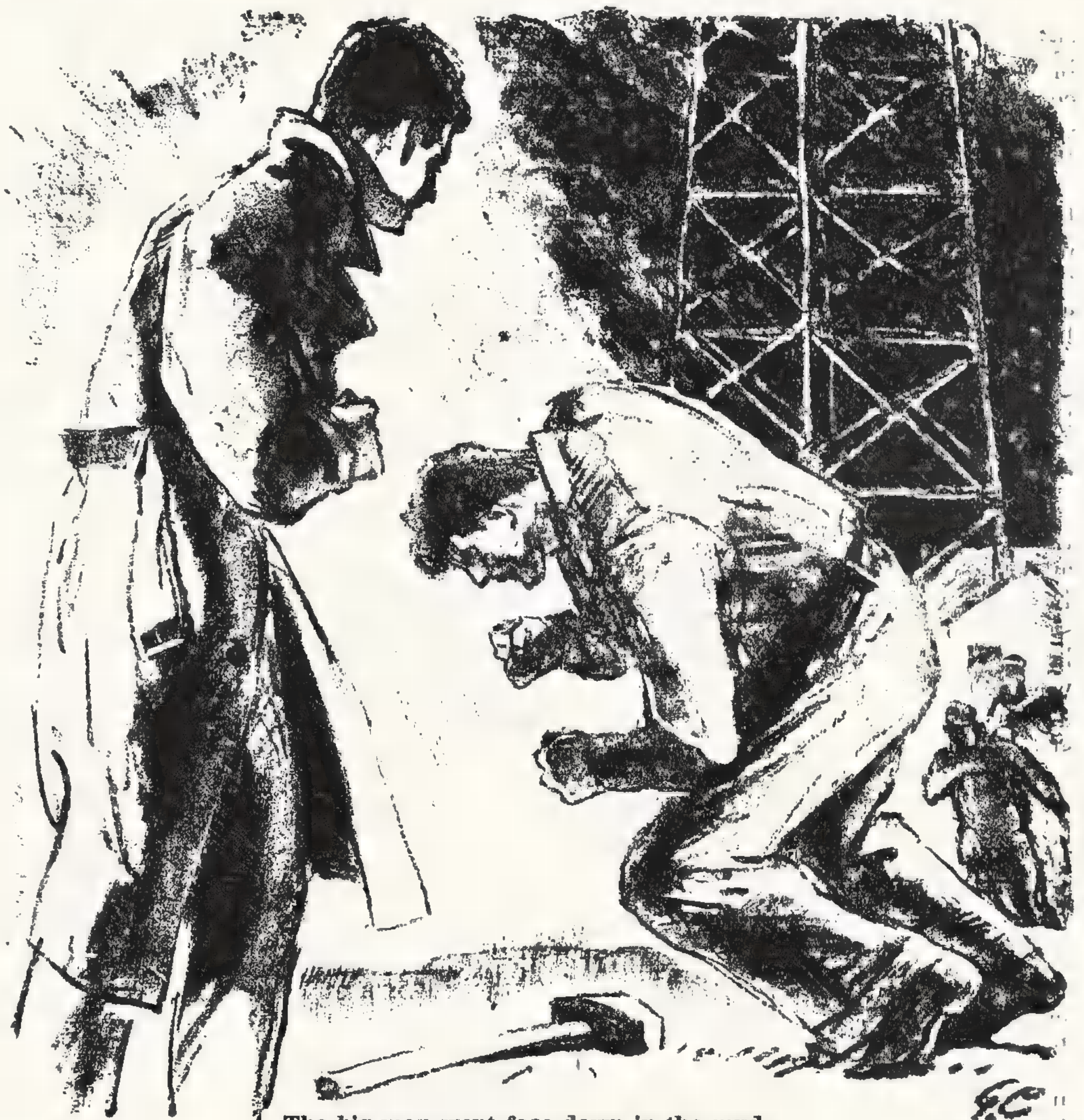
Bell stood an instant, his eyes shifting from Wade to the girl; then he turned and ran for the phone in the tool-shed.

Wade swung around toward Chandler's hydraulic block, but Jane's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Wade, you're not thinking—"

She broke off, to stand looking up at him, her finely modeled face reflecting the wild light of the fire, her eyes shocked with the fear that had been in them the night her father had gone to his death in the Black Lady.

Wade stepped back to take her shoulders reassuringly in his big hands.



The big man went face down in the mud.

"Steady, sweetheart," he said. "Steady now. There's going to be no call for me to go into this thing. This is Chandler's fire, and he used to be a heat man himself. He can use my boat and put a cap on that thing; and if we move fast enough, we'll even be able to save our own rig."

He saw relief mist her eyes, and she smiled through the rain that was streaking her face.

"Okay," she said. "Now I won't bother any more."

Wade grinned at her as he hustled her back into the car and slammed the door.

"You stay in out of the muck—and back this thing down the road if the ground oil gets to going."

He turned and ran off across the flat.

Jess Chandler, a huge, barrel-chested man was on the Wildcat nozzle-block directing one of the hydraulic streams himself, but he gave the guide-bar to one of

his men as Wade Lewis came up. His eyes were heat-reddened and puffed, but there was a defensive set to his jaw.

"If this aint luck," he yelled. "Pulling in a gusher after three dry holes, and then having her blow all to hell!"

Wade didn't mention the casing mud he had suggested three days before. He just said:

"It's tough, all right; but you've got enough pipe out there to hold a valve collar, and I've phoned down for my old boat. Let's get this water shut off and some lines worked in so you'll be ready to move."

Chandler's head jerked back.

"Boat! What the hell are you talking about? A boat would be suicide in there! The first time a streamer cracks down, the whole surface is going to blow a mile high!"

Wade Lewis caught his temper and held it hard. "Listen," he said: "you're

not throwing enough water in there to make it burn good! All you're going to do is hike the sump level up until you flood oil all over the flat, and build a fire that can never be stopped! Where do you think your casing head will melt to after this thing has burned on the ground for a couple of hours?"

Chandler swung his heavy body toward Wade, and the fire's glare made the red lines of his face show black.

"Like hell I'll shut off the water! I was fighting oil-fires when you were a squirt kid; and flooding's the only chance we've got with a thing like this! We'll get the sump level up another foot, dynamite the head and let the weight of water choke it off!"

"Choke off nothing," Wade said furiously. "All you'll do is make a bonfire out of my rigging."

"Damn your rigging!" Chandler said coldly. "What's your heap of sticks compared with my loss? Tie a wet sack around 'em if you want; but the water stays on!"

"THE hell it does!" Wade said through his teeth. He was off the nozzle block in a long bound, and two more strides carried him to the open-faced pump-shed where the big electric rotary was turning. Before Chandler realized his purpose, he had thrown out the knife-switch and cut the power.

The hiss went out of the nozzles; as the pressure fell, the two streams of water dropped across the sump like slack cables.

Jess Chandler roared an oath and sprang at Wade, but he came in with his arms too high, and Lewis slid under them and struck with all his might. The big man went face down in the mud. He tried to pull his legs up under him, but he was too stunned for coördination, and he spilled over on his back.

From the corner of his eye, Wade saw Bud Bell and three others coming around the sump on the run; but there wasn't time to wait, so he scooped up a sledge and swung it hard. The steel head caught the pump-worm squarely, and crashed through the casting to let the last of the dying pressure spill out.

The swift finality of the act stopped Chandler's crew cold for an instant, and Wade Lewis seized that time.

"Hold it, and do some thinking! Your water's off to stay, and we're going boating on your pond. If anybody thinks different, I've got enough men to pick-handle his ears off!"

Red Avery, Chandler's drilling foreman, stood a moment with his muscles bunched for a spring; then he shrugged.

"Okay, guy. You've cut yourself a fat hog, and you'd better be right—only don't look for any of my boys to ride in your crazy boat."

"Don't worry about who rides," Wade said grimly, and turned to lead his men back across the flat.

Bud Bell didn't say anything until they were nearly to the K2 toolshed; then he growled:

"Well, you sure shut the water down—but, Mister, if I can't make a valve stick on that casing head, we're liable to spend a long time in jail. That little job of yours was well up in the felony class!"

"You don't have to make the valve stick," Wade told him. "I'm the only heat monkey around here that hasn't got his face shoved in the mud, and I'm going to pin that collar on."

"Hey, listen," Bud said, "you know you—"

"Get started with the boat cables," Wade told him shortly, and went straight over to the car where Jane was waiting. He said to her without any preliminary at all:

"Kid, I've got to go into this fire. You'll have to make a hole in that promise of mine."

He saw her lips set and her eyes widen with a look of hurt disbelief that struck him like a blow. For a moment she was still; then she shook her head.

"You know that I won't release you from that promise, Wade. You know I wouldn't do that if the whole oil business was burning up."

Wade just stood there with his hands resting on the door and the rain beating across him. He delayed the thing he was about to do for ten dragging seconds, and then said:

"Then I'll have to break it. I started this, and I've got to finish it."

JANE didn't answer him. She just sat looking at him in a way he'd never seen before; and after a moment he turned and walked across the yard to the shed where his asbestos suit was stored. He knew how Jane felt about fires, and how she felt about promises. He knew what going in there was going to mean.

There was none of the old familiar tightness or excitement in Wade Lewis as he laid out the huge fire-blackened suit and started to buckle it on. Instead, he felt leaden and depressed. The value of

his derrick and rig seemed in poor proportion to the price he was paying even if he saved it; but there was no way to change the course of things then. In smashing that pump, he had declared himself and named his stakes; and in the man's business of oil, you either go through or you are done. To Jane, it was just one fire and a promise; but Wade Lewis and every other man in the field knew that it ran deeper than that. They knew the industry's answer to a crackpot who smashes equipment to make a play and then folds up. A man who once lets the yellow streak show couldn't get a swamper's job on any rig in the business.

Wade was thinking of those things as he finished with the pants-straps and looked up to find Jane standing in the doorway. For an instant he hoped that it was going to be all right, that she understood. Then an extra flare of light showed him her face, and he knew it was no use.

She said in a tight little voice that barely carried above the howl of the fire:

"Wade, you're not really going to do it?"

HE went across to her then his huge boots and pants flopping grotesquely, making his wide shoulders seem lank and skinny in the mixed light of the fire and bare electric bulb. He knew that what he did say was the wrong thing and left him wide open, but he said:

"Jane, if this derrick and rig go, I'm washed out, cleaned and broke. We'd have to start a stake all over again with nothing but my hands."

"I don't care for the derrick, and I don't care if we have nothing at all as long as you're alive and safe. Wade, you know I love you enough to marry you if you haven't a dollar or the hope of one; but if you break your word to me—"

She cut off as Bud Bell came thrusting in. He had his safety hat jammed on the back of his head, and his eyes were aflame.

"Listen! You know what that louse done? He phoned the sheriff—that's what he done! He's charging us with trespass and felonious damage, and he's going to have us arrested before we can put a boat on his pond! Good God, this fire's a racket to burn you out and squeeze you off your lease, just when you're busting into the sand!"

Wade said furiously: "Arrest me! Well, it'll take a damn' lot hotter sheriff than this county's got, to paddle out across that sump and pull me in before I've



"Nobody alive is going to drag me back before I've made my try!"



Wade's mind was still fuzzy, but he got that. "She did *that*? Where is she?" he yelled.

we'll cross the law when we come to it! If that boat should get here in time, nobody alive is going to drag me back before I've made my try!"

Bell swore again, but he rushed into action. He snatched the huge asbestos coat off the work-bench, and together the two men fought it over Wade Lewis' head and shoulders.

When that was done and Wade's vision was clear, he saw Jane Miller pivot away from the doorway and out into the rain-streaked glare. He held the headpiece away for an instant, but he didn't call after her. They had both said their words. Even if he stopped her, he had nothing that he could add.

"Let's go," he told Bud; and as his head went into the helmet, he saw the flash of headlights as the girl swung his car around and rolled out of the yard.

After that, things moved so fast that there was no room for personal thought or pain. He had to try the oxygen bit and feeder. He had to let Bud Bell check all the couplings of his great casing, and adjust the harness for his personal safety-line; then he pulled the headpiece off again to leave him free to direct other things.

While they were checking the hastily rigged boat lines, three sets of incoming

slapped a cap on this thing! Get the gondola rigged, and I'll give him a new place to make a pinch!"

Bud Bell just forgot all about Jane Miller and said what was in his mind. He got all tangled up and frothy, but he got enough other words in with his straight invective to explain that the sheriff and his men were due to arrive some minutes before the gondola from Metropolitan. He wound it up with the flat fact that although his crew stood ready and willing to slap the ears off of Chandler's gang, bucking the law and tear-gas was something else again, and he figured they were stuck.

"Stuck, be damned!" Wade roared. "Help me into the rest of this outfit, and

car lights flared over the Ajax hills and started down.

Bud Bell was beside Wade when those lights showed, but he didn't say what he feared. He just swung around to point toward a single pair of headlights that were crawling in from the Metropolitan field to the west.

"About the same time," Wade said in a voice that was thin and savage. "But we'll stick with our rigging until they shotgun us off!"

THERE was no time for setting in haul cables with blocks and a backline drag; so Wade Lewis sent four men around Chandler's sump with orders that were as simple as they were blunt.

"If we get that gondola hooked on, you get moving and keep moving until I'm bucked up against the casing head. Then you hold me there! Hold me there until the flow is valved off or the gondola is blown off the lake!"

The men went on the run, and Wade checked the car lights on both sides. The truck-lights looked yellow through the rain and smoke, but they were coming up over the last little rise of ground. To the east, the lamps gleamed hard and white from the middle of the flat.

The young driller ran his eye around the grim-faced circle of his crew, and what he saw there was good.

"This looks like about an even thing," he told them. "I'm not asking you to buck the law, but if we get an extra minute, we can get that boat on the pond. Keep your pick-handles ready. If Chandler tries to slow us, clear the ground!"

"Okay," one of the men grunted, and then cried: "Hey, boys! Them law lights have slowed down. They—"

The next moment the Metropolitan truck came slashing in through the muck, and things began to move with a rush.

The square, flat-bottomed metal boat with its rounded tin roof was yanked from the truck's bed and down a plank skid. While it was still being dragged toward the sump's rim, the fore-and-aft cables were lashed on, and a tool kit and a hinge-valve were thrown inside.

Bud Bell helped Wade with the helmet again; and as it went down into place, he said harshly:

"We're for you, kid; but no hero stuff! If them set-bolts begin to grind when the shut-off starts, you let her go and come on out!"

Wade Lewis made a pass at him with a heavy, padded hand, and got the oxygen

bit in his teeth as he went through the lifting door in the end of the boat. The last thing he saw as the trap went down and he started to move was the glare of headlights lurching into the yard.

After that, he didn't give a damn for the law and all its men, because he knew the drag-crew beyond the sump would keep him moving, and he had a job to do.

Through the fire-glass in the front of the gondola he could see the outline of the casing and jet ahead; but the uneven glare blocked off the details. He couldn't tell the shape of the broken pipe top until the front of his boat was jammed hard against it, and he had worked his sliding work-door open.

He felt the heat for the first time then. It struck down across his shoulders and the front of his asbestos suit like a breath from hell, but he saw what he wanted to see. The casing was broken clean and square and would take a valve.

He closed his door again then and got things ready. He got everything set just to suit him, because he knew he was only going to be able to stand that heat for a few seconds.

HE took some oxygen and let her go; slammed the firedoor back, braced his knees hard against the wall and heaved the ninety-pound hinge-valve out and slapped it around the casing. The safety clamp dropped into place, and he thrust the collar upward until the open valve-socket was above the hissing pipe top.

There was a tight second then. If the stream was too fuzzy at the jet or the suction too great, it would take his valve and guide-collar out of his hands like a toy and hurl it away. If its weight interrupted the suction for an instant, the fire would come spilling down to leave him in a raging inferno.

Heat felt like a great searing load on Wade's hands and arms, but the jet cleared, and he took more oxygen as he swung the hinged collar bolts into their sockets and twisted hard on the handle of the set pin.

After that he could work from the inside with a long-shanked speed wrench, and he wound his bolts hard. With the swing bolts set, he worked his stay-screws in to the danger point against the cast well-casing, and was ready for the real test.

If the valve could be shut down and stay on the head, he had licked a fire. If it couldn't, he would have no warning until it blew, with real hell to pay.

ONE MORE FIRE

He took oxygen again and set the valve-key in the socket. He closed his door down until it left a crack only as wide as the key shaft, and started to turn. He turned as fast as he could, because when a valve starts to take hold, the jet begins to feather and the fire drops quick.

Flame rushed down to swamp his boat when the valve was about two-thirds closed, but he drove it on shut. He knew the collar was sticking because the rod wasn't torn from his grip; and he knew it was holding the oil, because the vibration of the flow was gone. But by feel was the only way he knew these things. A fire is black night from the inside, and he couldn't see a thing.

The next second his furnace of a boat began to move and he let the turn rod go, jammed the fire-door the rest of the way shut, and gave himself another shot of oxygen.

He knew by the jar when his boat struck the sump rim; and from the way it kept on bouncing and slithering over the ground, he guessed that the ground fire had spilled over and that they were dragging him wide with the truck.

But the swaying stopped at last, and he threw his weight against the hinge door and sprawled out.

Bud Bell only waited long enough to get the helmet off and see that he was all right before he began to shout.

"Boy! Look at her! You pinned her ears back! The sump'll frizzle out in an hour, and we'll be back shoving down our hole!"

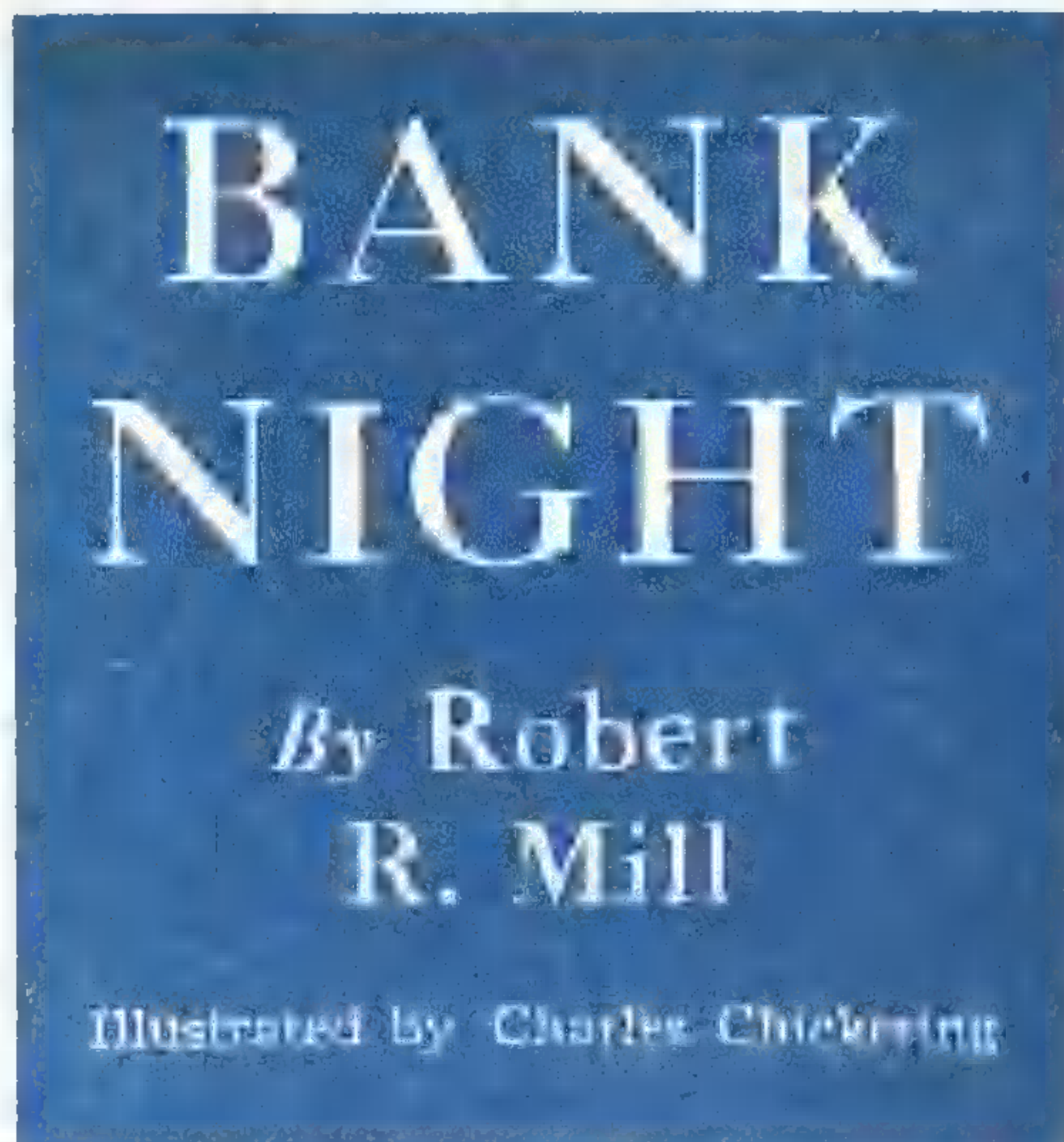
Wade was pretty dizzy from the heat and the oxygen, but there was no jet going up through the blazing sump. There might be leaks, but there wasn't anything his own hydraulic rig couldn't put out in thirty minutes, and he started to feel good—until he remembered Jane. That took all the good out of things, but he couldn't say anything about her to those men, so he asked about the sheriff and his arrival.

"He was late," Bud Bell said. "He was pretty mad when he got here, but there was nothing he could do about the delay. You can't arrest a girl just because she has some hard luck and skids a car around in the mud so it totally blocks a road!"

Wade's mind was still a little fuzzy, but he got that. He yelled:

"She did *that*? Where is she?"

"Right here, darling," Jane said from behind him, and he spun around to find her smiling up at him through a mixture of soot, rain and happy tears.



IT was a fine day for motoring. Lieutenant Edward David, who occupied the right side of the front seat, relaxed the many pounds and square inches that had earned for him the nickname of Tiny. His companion, Lieutenant James Crosby, who was at the wheel of the official car belonging to the Black Horse Troop, New York State Police, regarded him with mild apprehension.

"Want to leave a call?"

Mr. David's half-closed eyes fluttered open, but only momentarily.

"All right," said Mr. Crosby. "I'm the working class, and you are the idle rich. It always does work out that way. But remember, some day the workers of the world will arise. That's when you'll get yours."

There was no answer for at least several miles, and the eyelids went closed again. Whereupon Mr. Crosby gave a gentle sigh of resignation, but his state of submission quickly vanished as he glanced at the road ahead.

A low sport roadster, driven by a girl, which had been loafing along the highway, suddenly accelerated. Soon the car achieved a speed well beyond the speed-limit and safety. The girl, after one backward glance, devoted herself to her driving.

Mr. Crosby's foot went down on the accelerator, and his grasp on the wheel tightened. The troop car lurched forward, and Mr. David, being quite unprepared, received a jolt.

"Sorry," said Mr. Crosby, and his tone belied the word. "Things like that will happen when you ride around with rough

*A lively adventure of Tiny David and
the State Police.*



troopers. You should get yourself a private chariot and a flunky."

Mr. David, aroused by the speed, sat up and took notice.

"What's it all about?" he demanded.

"My written instructions haven't arrived yet," retorted Mr. Crosby, "but when I see a car making seventy-five, I usually go after it. I'm funny like that."

The chase didn't last long. The troop car pulled alongside the roadster. Crosby jerked his thumb toward the side of the road. The girl stopped, and the troop car came to a halt behind the roadster.

Both troopers stepped out, and approached the roadster. Mr. Crosby had paper and pencil in hand.

The girl was smiling as she sat waiting for them. She was pretty in a striking way. Her clothes and her make-up were vivid. She was very much at ease.

"I know," she began, "you're going to ask me where the fire is."

Mr. Crosby, already a victim, smiled uncertainly. Mr. David stepped into the breach.

"Now that you've taken one of our very best lines right out of our mouth," he began, "just where is the fire?"

The girl's smile became more dazzling.

"Here's where we leave the script," she retorted. "There really isn't any fire. It is a fine day. The road is broad, and there isn't much traffic. I always have wanted to see what this car would do, so I decided it was a good time to see if—"

Mr. David, apparently, joined Mr. Crosby as a victim. His smile was rather fatuous. But Mr. Crosby, who decided that this was his show, took charge.

"We have a law covering that," he declared. Then he bent over the slip. "The name?"

"Vera Hamtrow."

"Address?"

"You want to know where I'm living now, don't you? You see, I really live in the city, but Mother and I have been staying at Canaras Lake for the last two months. We have the house at 23 Main Street."

At the same time the smile became more dazzling. Mr. Crosby made a brave struggle, then surrendered.

"Oh, I guess—" He put the paper aside. "I forgot one thing: what's the telephone number?"

THE smile was slightly hampered by a puzzled look, which gave the girl's face an expression in which softness was not the dominant quality.

"Is there a space for that on the blank you have there?" she asked.

Mr. Crosby grinned.

"No," he admitted. "My official life ended when I put the paper in my pocket. This is strictly personal, but it's important. How will I be able to call you up if I don't know your telephone number?"

The smile came back in all its dazzling glory.

"That seems reasonable," the girl admitted. "The number is 437."

"Good enough," said Mr. Crosby.



"How's it going?" she demanded.

"Is that all?" asked the girl.

"It's enough for now," Mr. Crosby admitted. "Hereafter, don't try to qualify for Indianapolis on the open roads."

"I promise," said the girl. She fumbled with the gear-shift.

Mr. David took a hand in the proceedings.

"How do you like it at Canaras Lake?" he asked.

"Not bad," said the girl. "It's a little tame after the city, but that's what we want. You see, the doctor said Mother needs quiet."

Mr. David laughed. "You'll get large slices of that at Canaras Lake; you don't have any noisy neighbors there, do you?"

The girl's laugh matched his.

"Not exactly. Let's see. We have the Ajax Fruit and Vegetable Market on one side. The Canaras National Bank holds down the other. Across the street is Mrs. Caspar's boarding-house, and from what I have seen, you have to be sixty to get in there. No, we haven't a jitterbug on the block."

"You won't be quiet long," Tiny David told her. "Crosby is a very noisy guy."

The girl's smile was arch as she drove away.

"Can I depend on that?" she called back.

Mr. Crosby displayed considerable satisfaction as he returned to the troop car.

"Not a bad day's work," was his verdict. "We enforced the law. Just as the Captain says, a well-spoken word often is better than a fine." His self-satisfaction increased. "At the same time I get myself a nice telephone number. In fact, one of the very best telephone numbers I've seen for some time. Imported stuff."

Mr. David was not overly impressed. "There may be duty to pay," he warned.

Mr. Crosby dismissed that warning with an airy wave of the hand.

"Not if you have the freedom of the port," he retorted. . . .

Three nights later Mr. Crosby returned to the barracks, very late and much exalted, but entirely innocent of any liquid exhilaration. Instead of seeking his bed, he entered Mr. David's room and seated himself directly on two large knees. Mr. David awoke with an automatic protest on his lips, but he was quickly shouted down.

"She's a swell gal," Mr. Crosby began. "And her mother's a great old dame. Darned nice people. Lonely as the devil, too. I'll have to get over often."

Mr. David rubbed his eyes.

"I'm in favor of it," he declared. "Wish you were back there right now. Get out of here and let me sleep."

During the next two weeks Mr. Crosby beat a more or less regular path between the barracks and Canaras Lake. He visited that town on every occasion when he was off duty, and several times when he was not. Captain Charles Field, commanding officer of the Black Horse Troop, watched developments in silence.

"Why don't you get a weekly rate at the hotel over there, and just drop in here pay-days?" he asked at lunch one day.

Mr. Crosby choked on his third glass of milk.

"Sir?" was the best he could manage.

"Skip it!" Captain Field ordered. "There's one thing in your favor: when you make a fool of yourself, you go whole hog."

MR. CROSBY retired from the dining-room in bad order, and sought Mr. David in the garage.

"How did he find out?" he demanded.

"As far as I know," declared Mr. David, "the Skipper is in full possession of his faculties."

Mr. Crosby maintained a dignified silence as he took out his car, and headed for Canaras Lake. There was plenty of time for thought on the way, and Mr. Crosby was not idle. Captain Field, obviously, was on the warpath. That was bad. Captain Field's theory of warfare was not unlike that of the European dictators: fight things through to a quick and successful conclusion. Mr. Crosby had no desire to be on the receiving end.

But all these pessimistic thoughts were banished when he arrived at the house in

the village of Canaras Lake, where he was received with a very warm welcome indeed.

After some preliminary conversation, the conversation swung to the roadster.

"It won't be necessary for you to patrol the roads for the next week," the girl told him.

"Why not?" Mr. Crosby asked.

"My car is in the shop."

"What's wrong with it?" Mr. Crosby asked.

"Just a regular overhaul. Cylinders rebored, and all that. You can't drive them forever, you know."

AFTER that the conversation became more personal. It was getting quite personal at about eleven, when Mrs. Hamtrow appeared and asked: "No telephone calls?"

"Not a thing," said the girl.

Her mother shook her head, and left the room.

"Mother's worried almost to death," the girl explained. "Her sister is very sick. We may have to go back to the city if she gets any worse."

Mr. Crosby registered sympathy, but this sympathy was somewhat adulterated by his displeasure over the thought of the girl leaving Canaras Lake, even temporarily. It was on this note that he took his departure, a process that was somewhat lengthy.

He was whistling gayly as he walked from the porch to the main street, and made his way toward his car. As he passed the bank, which was located next to the Hamtrow house, he was greeted by an aged man who wore a nondescript uniform.

"How's crime?" the aged man cackled.

Mr. Crosby paused. "Hello, Pop. How's banking? Keeping good track of the fives, tens and twenties every night?"

The watchman grinned. "Yep. But it kinda gets on your nerves, bein' there all alone. Several nights here lately seems like I've been hearing funny noises down in the basement, but when I get there, there aint nothin'. Guess I'm just gettin' old."

"I guess you've called the turn, Pop. The place to look for noises is at the front door. If you hear 'em there, I'd go a little easy about opening the door. Well, don't let it get you down."

Captain Field went into action the following morning. Being a tactician not wholly committed to one set form of attack, he decided that this was a situation

that called for boring from within. Therefore he summoned Lieutenant Charles McMann, the senior lieutenant, and when McMann was in the office, carefully closed the door.

"Crosby has girl trouble again," the Captain began. "While it lasts, he isn't worth anything to the troop or himself. Ordinarily these things run their course in three or four weeks, but I'm getting older, and I'm not as patient as I once was. We might hurry things along a bit."

Mr. McMann maintained a non-committal silence.

"I'm not asking you to get a pal in trouble," the Captain continued. "All he needs is a good scare. Some night next week we'll give him an assignment near Canaras Lake. It's a cinch he'll duck away to see that dame. You and I'll be on hand to catch him at it, and the scare he'll get will give him some thoughts about the P.W.A. to mix up with love's young dreams."

"Yes sir," said Mr. McMann, who did not look forward to this with relish.

"Furthermore," said Captain Field, who knew well the men he commanded, "I expect this to work. In other words, I can't see how either Crosby or David have a chance of finding out about what we are planning." He stared at Mr. McMann intently. "Do you?"

Under those circumstances, Mr. McMann didn't.

"No sir," he said.

THE end of the week was marked by only one incident. Max Payton, top-sergeant of the troop, entered the office shared by the lieutenants, where Mr. Crosby was giving a convincing impersonation of a top-flight executive at work.

"Telephone-call for you, sir," said Mr. Payton.

Mr. Crosby looked up.

"Take the message," he directed, "and give it to me later."

Mr. Payton grinned rather foolishly.

"Well?" Mr. Crosby demanded.

"If it please the lieutenant, if the message is love and kisses, will the lieutenant care to have me deliver them to him?"

There were snickers from the occupants of several of the other desks, but Mr. Crosby evidently saw nothing funny.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" he demanded. . . .

That noon, although the Filipino chef was in top form, Mr. Crosby's appetite was much below par.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Mr. David.

"I have things on my mind," said Mr. Crosby.

"Better hold them down with a thumb-tack," suggested Mr. David, "because there isn't much room for anything there. They might fall off and break."

Mr. Crosby lowered his voice. "Mrs. Hamtrow's sister is very sick."

"So what?"

Mr. Crosby registered sorrow. "Vera may have to go to the city."

"In that case," said Mr. David, "the chances of you holding your job go up considerably."

Three days later, early in the morning, Mr. McMann for the second time was summoned into the presence.

"That baby is getting no better fast," Captain Field declared. "We'll go to work on him tonight."

"Yes sir," said Mr. McMann. There didn't seem to be much else he could say.

"That new highway between Deerville and Tranquil Lake runs within five miles of Canaras Lake," Captain Field continued. "I am going to give Crosby a roving assignment to patrol that road afternoons and nights for the next four days. I'm going to order him to make his headquarters in Deerville, and to keep out of Canaras Lake. But it's my bet that the first night will find him at Canaras Lake. You and I will be there to see if I have to pay off."

Mr. McMann again said: "Yes sir."

AT the same time Mr. Crosby was having a heavy telephone session.

"Mother's sister is ever so much worse." The girl's voice broke. "I guess this is the end. They've sent for us, and told us to get there as soon as possible."

There was a pause while Mr. Crosby tried to express his sympathy.

"We've missed the noon train," the girl continued. "That means taking the night train." There was an added note of anxiety in her voice. "Mother can't stand sleepers. They make her sick every time. Oh, I wish I knew what to do."

Mr. Crosby came to the rescue. "Why not drive her down?"

"I thought of that," the girl said. "But my car is in the garage. I called them up, but it won't be ready for two days."

Mr. Crosby did some rapid thinking.

"What time do you want to leave?" he asked.

"I can't tell you exactly when we will be ready," the girl said, "but it will be

some time between five and six o'clock this evening."

Mr. Crosby hesitated, swallowed hastily, and then went the whole way.

"How about my driving you down?" he asked.

There was a cry of delight at the other end of the wire.

"Oh, that'll solve everything! How can I thank you? I'll never forget this. Neither will Mother."

MR. CROSBY sparred for time.

"Well, of course, I'll have to arrange things here a bit, but I'm sure I can make it."

"I know you can!" the girl cried. "I'm depending on you."

"I'll call you back just as soon as I find out," Mr. Crosby promised.

After leaving the telephone, Mr. Crosby swallowed twice, squared his shoulders, then knocked on the door of Captain Field's office.

"Come in," came the invitation.

Mr. Crosby entered and saluted. "If it please the Captain—"

Captain Field looked up with pleasure.

"Just the man I was looking for," he declared. "Have an assignment for you. My scouts tell me speeders are running wild on that new road between Deerville and Tranquil Lake. You get over there and patrol it for three or four days."

Captain Field continued with obvious relish:

"Things are worse from middle afternoon until about one in the morning. That's when you'll work. You'll make your headquarters in Deerville. And you'll keep out of Canaras Lake. Is that plain?"

Mr. Crosby gulped hastily.

"Yes sir. If it please the Captain—"

"Nothing pleases me except the thought that you're going to be away from here for two or three days, and really doing some useful work. Get started."

Mr. Crosby got started. Out in the hall he paused to take stock. This was bad. Very bad! There was no arguing with Captain Field when he was in that mood. The trip to the city was about as remote a possibility as an invitation to tea with the President. He started toward the telephone. Then the memory of a girl's voice came to him:

"Oh, that'll solve everything! How can I thank you? I'll never forget this . . . I'm depending on you."

Mr. Crosby shook his head.



He took a desperate chance. "Jim!" he shouted. "Help! Come quick."

Fifteen minutes later, after much heavy brain-work, the solution arrived. He could make the city in eight hours. The return trip meant another eight hours. Sleep would just have to go by the board. Once back, he would go out on that road and grab enough unlucky motorists to account for two or three days' work. Mr. Crosby, a weight removed from his shoulders, headed for the telephone.

He waited impatiently while the connection was being made, and then heard a familiar voice.

"I can make it," Crosby blurted out.

"That's fine," the girl answered. There was a pause. "But I'm afraid we won't be ready as early as I thought. There are so many things to do at the last minute. Can you meet us here about nine?"

A wave of relief swept over Mr. Crosby. That would give him time to be seen on his assignment, and even to do a little actual work, before he deserted.

"Swell! I'll see you then."

SHORTLY after the evening meal, Captain Field summoned Tiny David. "McMann and I will be away for the evening," the commanding officer stated. "You will be in charge. That means staying here, and not chasing all over the territory for every minor complaint. Do you understand that?"

Apparently Mr. David did.

In due course of time Captain Field and Lieutenant McMann departed amid a slight air of mystery. It was a good hour later when Max Payton, the top-sergeant, entered the inner office, where Mr. David was holding forth in solitary grandeur.

Mr. Payton saluted and began: "If it please the lieutenant—"

"Can that," ordered Mr. David, who had entered the troop at the time Mr. Payton had enlisted. "Sit down."

Mr. Payton sat.

"What's on what you jokingly call your mind?" asked Mr. David.

"Jim Crosby drew an assignment on the new Deerville-Tranquil Lake high-

way," Mr. Payton began. "That's near Canaras Lake."

"Is this a geography lesson?" asked Tiny David.

"No," Mr. Payton asserted. "But it might interest you to know that just before the Skipper ducked out, he told me that if it was really necessary, I could get in touch with him at Canaras Lake. You might try that out on your adding machine and see if it gets you anything."

There was a thoughtful expression on Mr. David's face.

"It's a lot more liable to get Jim Crosby something," he asserted.

Mr. Payton nodded assent. "That's the way I doped it," he admitted.

Mr. David stretched his long arms. He yawned. Then, apparently with deep regret, he hauled his huge form from the chair.

"I'm going out, Max. You don't know just where I am."

"Right," said Sergeant Payton. . . .

Mr. Crosby put in four solid hours of what he called high-grade patrolling on the highway to which he had been assigned. No less than nine unfortunate motorists were offered up as sacrifices upon the altar of making a few hours' work impressive enough to pass for a much more extended period. This having been accomplished, and with his mental processes so arranged that he really felt quite self-righteous, Mr. Crosby headed for Canaras Lake.

There he took the precaution of parking his car in a secluded side-street. Then, just five minutes ahead of the appointed time, he appeared at the Hamtrow house.

His appearance at the front door was noted with mixed feelings by two men occupying a window near by, which commanded a view of the Hamtrow house.

"THERE goes the monkey," said Captain Field. "Thinks he's as smart as Einstein. Worked like the devil for a few hours so he can show up with a fistful of bum arrest-slips. Then he ducks over here. Hid his car up an alley somewhere so it won't attract attention. All right; we'll let that monkey enjoy his evening, and when he comes out, we'll nail him." An afterthought came to the Captain. "He might duck out the back door on us. But there's no use watching. You scout around, find his car, and let the air out of the tires. Then he'll have to come around to the garage here, and we'll knock him off."

Mr. McMann departed on his errand with unwilling feet.

A short time later Mr. David arrived in Canaras Lake. He took the precaution of leaving his car in a garage some distance from the center of town. Then he made his way warily along back streets, bound for the Hamtrow house.

DARKNESS had fallen, but there was a bright moon. He was a good half-block away when he recognized Mr. Crosby's car, which was parked in the shadows. The next thing that attracted his attention was a figure bent over one of the front wheels. That figure was in uniform. He started to call out, then restrained himself.

Mr. David took advantage of every shadow as he made his way forward. A short distance from the car a thick elm tree offered shelter. Mr. David flattened himself behind it, and watched proceedings.

The figure at the car went from wheel to wheel. Occasionally there was the faint sound of hissing air. Then the figure straightened up, and departed in the direction of the main street.

"Isn't that nice!" muttered Mr. David to himself. "That was McMann, fixing Jim's car so he can't use it. Now he's hurrying back to meet the skipper. They probably have some nice hide-out that gives them a good view of the front of the house. They'll wait there, and knock Jim off when he comes out."

A grin spread over Tiny David's broad face.

"It would be just too bad if he didn't come out!" He chuckled. "Well, they have a nice night for it." He thought rapidly. "Not that Jim doesn't have a good scare coming to him."

Tiny David made his way along an alley that led to the rear of the Hamtrow house. He flattened himself, and crawled across the yard to the back door. For a moment he stood there deep in thought.

"Much better than knocking on the door," he decided. "Give Jim a real scare when I break in on them. He rates it." He shook his head thoughtfully. "Besides, I never did like this outfit. Don't know just why, but the feeling is there. Do no harm to take a bit of a look around."

A quick, careful examination showed that the back door was locked. Three windows within his reach were in the same condition. His glance fell upon the ground, where there was a double door

which obviously led to the cellar. This door was fastened with a padlock, but the hinges through which the lock was fastened were held in place by small, rusty screws. Tiny David pulled out his knife, and went to work, quickly, quietly, and efficiently. In a very short time the door swung open.

He had his flashlight in his hand as he descended the stairs. But it was not needed, because a small, dirt-encrusted bulb partially illuminated the cellar. The first thing that caught his eye were great piles of loose dirt and stone.

"That's funny," he muttered.

A vague feeling of alarm swept over him as he continued to descend the stairs. He was almost at the bottom when he noticed an opening in the side of one wall. His muscles tightened, and his hand instinctively went to the butt of his revolver as he moved forward.

NOW he was standing on the cellar floor, and he could see that the opening in the wall was the entrance of a crude tunnel which, although it was swallowed by darkness a short distance from the room, obviously extended away from the house for some distance. He crept forward and peered into the opening. Far ahead a tiny flash of light was visible, and muffled sounds carried back to him.

Tiny David backed away from the opening. He was thinking furiously. What was happening was as plain as a written report. It was a bank job. The girl and her mother were in on it. In some way, they planned either to make use of, or to implicate, Crosby.

He stood there uncertainly, undecided just what to do. Then a door directly above the basement opened, and somebody began to descend the stairs. Tiny David crouched behind a bin which had been used to store potatoes.

Vera Hamtrow's mother came down the stairs. She was carrying a large suitcase. She walked to the entrance of the tunnel, and listened intently. Then she whistled softly. An answering whistle came from the depths.

"How's it going?" she demanded in a hoarse voice.

"Swell!" came the muffled sound from the tunnel. "This box is a cinch. The torch went through it like nobody's business. We're picking up the best of the stuff. Be with you in a minute."

An evil smile fluttered across the face of the old woman as she sat down on a box to rest. The wait was not a long one.



"Jim and I just played it along."

Soon two men emerged from the tunnel, one of them carrying what looked like a crude laundry bag.

The old woman stood up, a look of anticipation on her face.

"Got it?" she asked.

"Got all we wanted," said one of the men. "There was a lot of other stuff, but we might have trouble passing it. I let it slide."

The old woman opened the suitcase. The man held up the bag, and there was a cascade of bank-notes, fastened in neat packages. Avarice was stamped on the face of the old woman.

"How much?" she demanded.

"About ten thousand," said the man. "Got that sap upstairs all lined up?"

The old woman laughed harshly. "That sap's feet are just itching to run Vera and me down to poor dear sister."

The harsh laugh was repeated, as she bent over, struggling to fasten the straps of the suitcase.

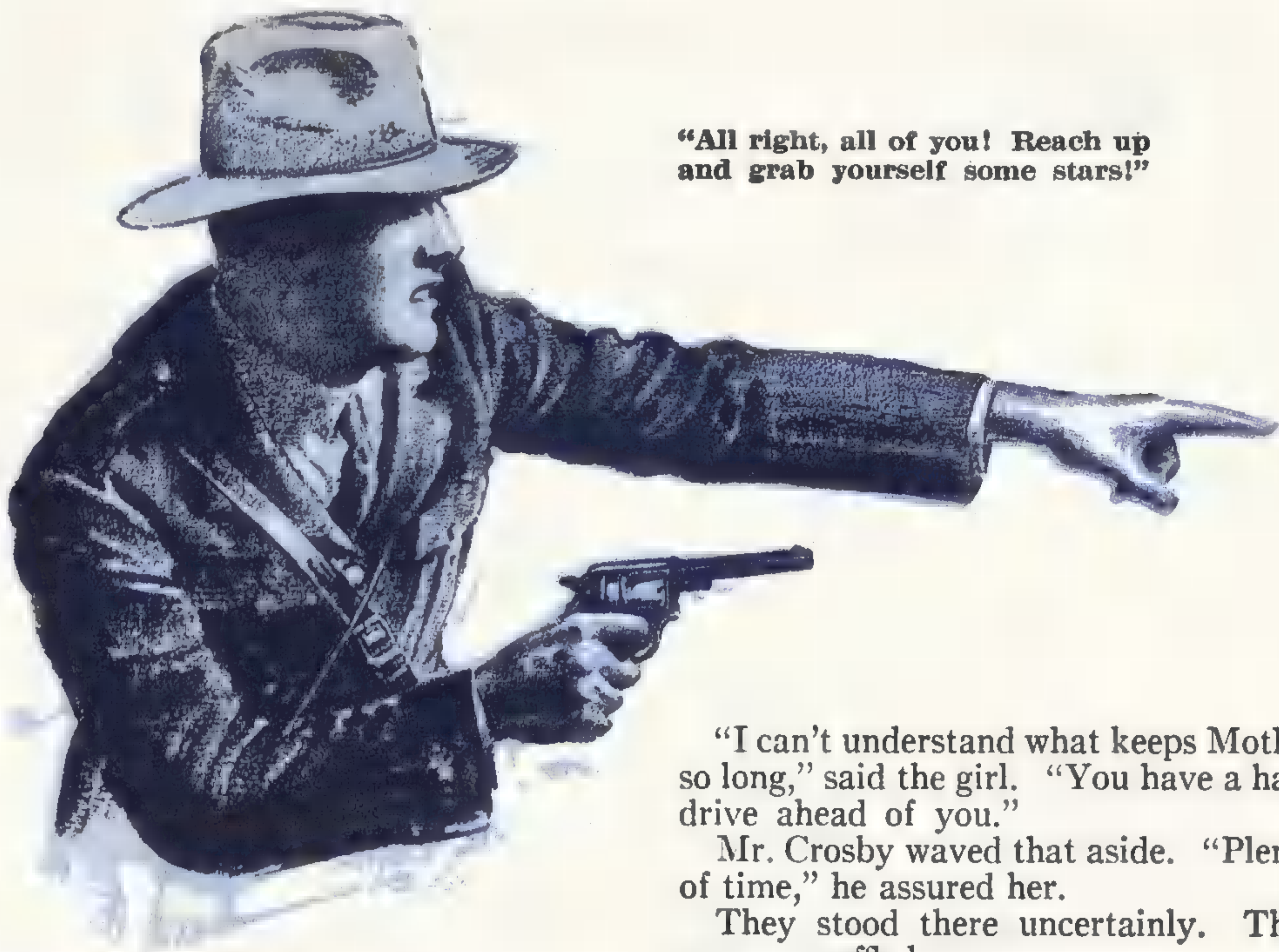
The man with the now empty bag also laughed.

"I don't know any better ticket through patrols that otherwise might be wondering what two dames was doing out that late at night," he asserted. "Jeff and me will lay low up here, and join you later."

Tiny David stood up, his gun in his hand.

"All right, all of you! Reach up and grab yourself some stars!"

They wheeled toward him. One man started slowly to obey. The old woman, obviously bewildered, stood her ground



"All right, all of you! Reach up and grab yourself some stars!"

uncertainly. The second man's hands remained motionless.

Tiny David made a rapid decision. This was a tight spot, and he couldn't take any chances. He strode toward them, and the muzzle of his heavy revolver struck the head of the man who had failed to raise his hands. The man slumped to the ground.

Even as he struck the blow, Tiny David realized he had eliminated the least dangerous of his adversaries. The man who had been holding the bag was upon him. One clutching hand seized the revolver, the other, with clenched fist, pounded at his face, and they locked in a death struggle.

Off to one side stood the old woman, still immobile.

The two men struggled back and forth, breathing heavily.

"Don't stand there," panted Tiny David's foe. "Do something."

The dark, evil eyes of the old woman spied a heavy shovel. She made her way toward it.

Tiny David made a last great effort. It was not good enough. He took a desperate chance.

"Jim!" he shouted. "Help! Come quick!"

CROSBY and the girl stood in the front living-room, obviously ready to leave, and awaiting only the return of the girl's mother.

"I can't understand what keeps Mother so long," said the girl. "You have a hard drive ahead of you."

Mr. Crosby waved that aside. "Plenty of time," he assured her.

They stood there uncertainly. Then came a muffled cry:

"Jim! Help! Come quick!"

A startled look crossed the girl's face. Crosby, taken completely by surprise, acted automatically. He bolted toward the rear of the house. There was an open door, from which faint light was visible. He entered the doorway, and began descending a flight of stairs.

IT was a strange scene that confronted him. One man was motionless on the floor. Tiny David was locked in the embrace of a second man, and they rolled back and forth over the dirt floor, engaged in a savage struggle. Standing over them, with a heavy shovel upraised, stood Vera Hamtrow's mother, obviously waiting until the struggling mass of humanity untangled sufficiently for her to deliver a telling blow.

Tiny David, rolling over in an effort to get a fresh grip, saw Crosby on the stairs.

"Grab the old woman," he panted.

Crosby hesitated, but habit was strong. He stepped behind Mrs. Hamtrow, seized her arms, and wrested the shovel from her.

Tiny David achieved a second of mastery.

"Pile in here," he ordered.

Crosby obeyed. The struggle was soon over. The old woman stood to one side, glaring at them.

"What's it all about?" Crosby demanded.



The old woman, obviously bewildered, stood her ground.

Tiny David climbed to his feet slowly.

"Your friends are part of a bank mob. Look at that tunnel! And they had you picked for the sucker to get them through with the loot. On top of all that, the Skipper and McMann are playing tag with you for being off the job. They're waiting out front."

Surprise and chagrin were reflected on Crosby's face.

"Snap out of it!" Tiny David ordered. "We have plenty to—"

He looked up, attracted by a slight noise. On the stairway stood Vera Hamtrow. In her hand she held a revolver, and it was trained upon them.

"PUT 'em up!" she ordered, grim determination in her voice.

The old woman let out a shrill cackle of triumph as they started to obey. Tiny David's moving right hand brushed slowly over a coal pile. His clutching fingers

seized a black lump, and his arm flashed forward as he sent the coal winging toward its target.

The coal caught the girl on the right arm, near the elbow. She gave a cry of pain, and the gun slipped from her grasp. Tiny David seized it.

"That's better," he said. "Now we'd better get organized. First thing to do is some high-grade trussing."

They worked quickly, using a length of clothesline they found on the wall. The arms of the man Tiny David had fought with were securely bound. The second man, who had recovered sufficiently to take an interest in the proceedings, was first searched, then bound also.

"Good enough," said Tiny David. "Now we—"

"But how about the Skipper?" faltered Crosby.

"I'll take care of that," Tiny David promised. "Do as I tell you and ask no

questions. Take this suitcase with you. It was the loot. Herd these two dames out the front door and toward your car. Try and act perfectly natural. The Skipper'll brace you. Just act dumb. I'll come along and fix things."

Crosby hesitated.

"Get started," Tiny David ordered.

"Come on," Crosby ordered the women. They obeyed sullenly.

The front door of the house opened. Mrs. Hamtrow appeared, followed by her daughter; close upon their heels came Crosby, carrying the suitcase.

Viewing this from their vantage-spot, Captain Field nudged McMann.

"Here comes the monkey. Let's knock him off."

They met at the end of the long walk leading from the Hamtrow house to the street. Captain Field removed his hat politely.

"Good evening," he said with icy formality.

Mr. Crosby tried to be equal to the occasion.

"Good evening, sir," he said.

"And how are you getting along with your work?" asked Captain Field.

There was an interruption. The front door of the Hamtrow house was thrown open. Two men, their hands bound behind them, were propelled through the door. Behind them came Tiny David, his revolver following the two men as they moved toward the group in the street.

Captain Field looked up in surprise. Past experience caused him to remain silent until the procession halted beside him.

"What's this all about?" the commanding officer demanded.

MR. DAVID leaned back comfortably against a fence-post before he began. Then he said:

"If it please the Captain, just a little bank job. Nice smart mob from the city. These two dames rented the house next to the bank. The men in the mob kept out of sight, and tunneled through to the vault, which is the gay nineties vintage. A torch made things very easy."

"Go on," said Captain Field grimly. "It has to be good to get Crosby and you in the clear."

There was a pained expression on Tiny David's face as he continued:

"They had a bright idea on getting the loot through safely to the city. The girl

vamped a trooper, and then sold him on the idea of driving her mother to the city to meet a sick sister. That would get them through any stray patrols that might wonder about women driving around alone late at night. The other members of the mob, who might not look good to a patrol, were to lie low here until things quieted down, and then join the women in the city."

"Good so far," Captain Field admitted. "But it has to get even better."

"It wasn't hard to tumble to," Tiny David continued. "The girl made a big mistake right at the start. She obviously got herself arrested on purpose for speeding. There were other things—strangers, a house right next to the bank. Lots of things like that."

He shrugged in modest deprecation.

"Jim and I just played it along. We didn't say anything, because it was just a hunch, and you look awful foolish if hunches don't pan out. It's way past the hunch stage now. We have the mob, and we have the loot. We—"

"You've said just enough," Captain Field cut in. He added dryly:

"The old horseshoe came through fine, but sometime it's going to backfire on you. You both are down in my little book, and it'll take a long stretch of good behavior to get your names erased. Now don't 'But Captain' me! Bank robbery or no bank robbery, I know what it's all about."

"Yes sir," said Tiny David meekly.

Captain Field cleared his throat noisily.

"Naturally, while we're clearing this thing up, troop discipline becomes a secondary matter."

Tiny David gave a gulp of relief. Mr. Crosby sagged weakly against a convenient tree.

"Yes sir," said Tiny David. Then he chuckled.

"What's that?" Captain Field demanded.

"I was just thinking, sir," Tiny David said: "We nearly took this mob out the back way, so there wouldn't be any commotion on the main street. In that case, the Captain might have had a good long wait for nothing. Isn't it lucky, sir, that we came out the front way?"

Captain Field glared at him. Then the commanding officer's face relaxed in a smile.

"Very lucky—for you and Crosby," Captain Field replied.

Another Tiny David story will appear in an early issue.

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

FINDERS KEEPERS

By GEOFFREY HOMES

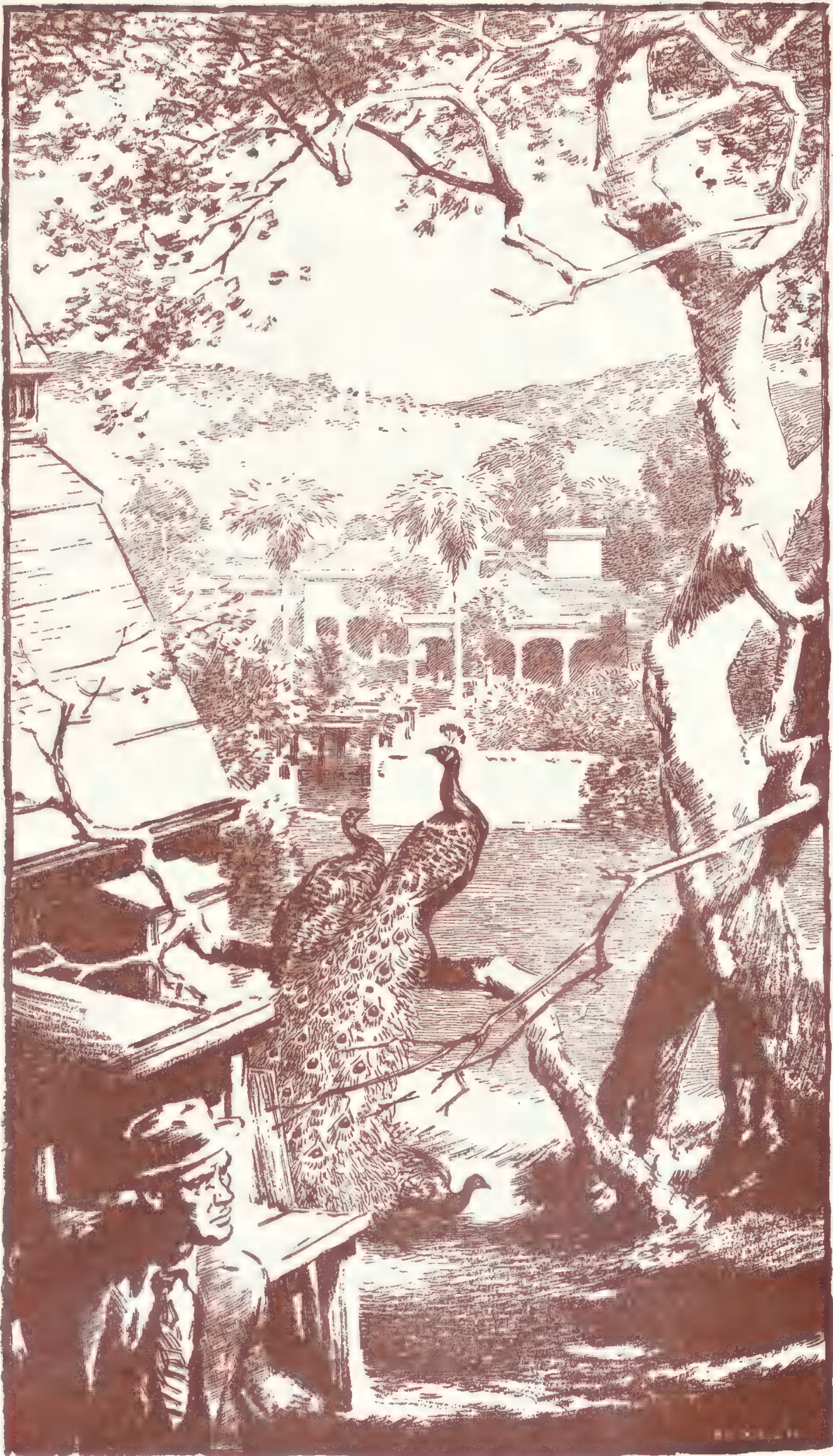
*Who wrote "No Hands on the Clock" and "The
Doctor Died at Dusk."*



Illustrated by Percy Leason

A MURDER MYSTERY BY ONE OF THE ABLEST
OF THE YOUNGER DETECTIVE-STORY
WRITERS—THE STORY OF A STRANGE OLD
TRAGEDY AWAKENING TO VIOLENT
LIFE ON A GREAT CALIFORNIA ESTATE.

COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE



"There may be something going on here at the Sycamores. Perhaps the ghost of that old tragedy has returned to haunt us."

FINDERS KEEPERS

By GEOFFREY HOMES

Who wrote "Then There Were Three" and "The Man Who Didn't Exist."

UNDER the giant sycamore, a man in a wheel-chair was writing a letter. Even shackled to the contraption of wire and wood, the man was an imposing figure, a great husk of a fellow with tremendous shoulders and a chest like a whisky keg. At first glance, he looked old, old enough to have laid the foundation for the white house thrusting its cupolas toward the bright field of the sky. His shock of hair was white, but he wasn't that old. The house had been built in 1860, and he had been born in it fifteen years later.

Sitting in the shadow of the ancient tree putting words on a piece of buff paper spread out on the arm of the chair, he was unsmiling, thoughtful, a little puzzled. Above him, a dove mourned now and then, but he didn't hear it, or if he did, he paid no mind. Far off, beyond the twisting body of the river, the blue mist of lupin hung over the foothills, and the sun was pulling the snow blanket off the shoulders of the higher hills. But for the moment he was unaware of the miracle of spring.

He wrote:

Dear Jay:

You said if I ever needed you, you'd come. Do you remember? It was that day ten years ago when you stood in my room in the Palace Hotel, spinning your dreams of the worlds you planned to conquer. I had come to take you home.

Perhaps when a man grows old, he becomes a child again, afraid of the dark. There is darkness here—that much

I know. And I'm afraid. So I turn to you. . . . The odd part about it is there is nothing really tangible—nothing I can put my finger on. I can't explain, for intuition is something you can't put into words. But it seems to me that death is not far off.

Three months ago I wouldn't have cared what happened. Then I had lost my desire for life. Two years tied to this wheeled thing seemed long enough. I saw no reason for being, and even considered self-destruction. Suddenly, life became very precious.

In a measure I have Harry and Ella to thank for it, though their motives, I know, were selfish. They were fed up with me; fed up with trying to keep me entertained. Their boredom brought Katherine Mesdrell.

She came home with Harry one evening, a tall, slim girl, who stood in the library door bewildered and a little frightened. My first impression was that she was coltish. Then she smiled and spoke to me, and she was beautiful. I saw her eyes—blue, blue eyes—and her wealth of hair—red-gold hair like your mother's. You see, we knew each other at once. In a moment she was on the footstool by my chair, and her hand was on my arm.

Human relationships are strange, aren't they? There are Harry and Ella, my own son and daughter; yet they have always seemed not my children but my father's children—while you, my stepson, have been my boy. And now Katherine, unknown to me for years, seems the only daughter I ever had.

At once I was a different man. Days were much the same as far as my routine went. But there was magic in them. There is still magic in them, though suddenly there has settled over this house a darkness dispelled only by her presence.

As I said, I can't explain it. There is only one certainty—a man with the face of a happy devil. I saw him on the bridge a month ago when we drove into town, and I saw him again under this tree in the moonlight.

Whether he is the cause of this feeling of impending trouble that lies on me when I am alone, I don't know. It may be something going on here at the Sycamores. Perhaps the ghost of that old tragedy has returned to haunt us. That may be. For some reason the past has been all around me the last few days. I do know that Ella and her husband have suddenly grown antagonistic, that Harry seems colder, more reserved, more like my father, than ever. Perhaps my decision to divide this estate into four equal parts has something to do with it. You won't mind, I know. A fourth will give you more money than you can ever spend. And I must repay, in some way, this girl who is giving me her youth and love.

You'll come, won't you?

Your father—

With a flourish he signed his name—*Stephen Dunecht*—then looked up. The lawn, a patchwork of light and shadow, swept to the edge of the bluff where the wall of Cherokee roses barred its way.

Below, the crooked river wandered through the willows, and in the flat land at the foot of the bluff there were two big red-roofed barns. Near the barns were four tremendous haystacks, and on one of the stacks two peacocks were feeding.

As he saw his world—a world of trees and fields and sky and far hills on which the little clouds lay in untidy heaps—his frown went away, and he looked almost happy. Up the hill a quail was calling; the ghost of a wind ran through the sycamores and cottonwoods and spindly eucalypti, and left a faint elusive scent in its wake. Suddenly a peacock cried out.

The frown returned to his fine, strong face. His hand fumbled in the canvas pocket hanging from the left arm of the chair and found a bell. Its bright tinkle drifted across the lawn.

Stephen Dunecht, crippled master of the Sycamores,—the last great estate in Joaquin County,—folded his letter and

put it in an envelope. On the envelope he wrote: "*Jay Martin, Esq. Cosmographic News Service, Key West, Fla.*"

The pen-point hovered over the paper, touched its surface again, added the words: "*Please Forward.*"

A door banged shut. Like a yellow wraith, an old Chinese came across the lawn, stood beside the wheel-chair looking down at the wreck of the man he had served for fifty years. "Yes, Mr. Stephen," the wraith's voice said.

"Give this to Katherine, please." And Stephen Dunecht smiled at the Chinese. "Ask her to take it to town for me."

The Chinese nodded. "You wish to stay here?"

"For a little while, Ch'en Tu." He watched the lean form go away. Down the hill, the peacock on the haystack cried again.

CHAPTER II

WHEN Miss Gates opened the door of the office, he was sitting on the worn leather couch with his long legs tucked under him and a year-old copy of a magazine in his lap. Because he was facing the window, she got a fine view of his back. The back, a broad, straight one, didn't interest her. What did was the butt of a revolver peeking out of his hip pocket. He swung around, and for one brief moment she thought he had horns. He didn't. It was the way his black hair curled up in two little peaks in front.

"Late," the man said. "We can't have this. Go down to the cashier and get your time." His green eyes took a good look at her, seemed to approve of what they saw, for he grinned.

"Good morning," she said crisply, took off her fragment of a hat and put it carefully in the bookcase in the corner, slipped out of her blue jacket and put it on a hanger. Then she went to her desk and tried to look prim. This was difficult, because there was nothing prim about Oscar Morgan's secretary. Her name was Gertrude Gates; she was twenty-three years old, and she looked like a burlesque queen. That was why she worked for Oscar. He liked buxom young women around.

"Good morning, beautiful," the man said. "Where's the boss?"

"Not here yet. Can I help you?" She gave up the prim business. The man, she thought, was a whole lot better-look-

ing than Oscar's assistant, Humphrey Campbell. She thought the man on the couch was romantic-looking. It was the scar, she decided. A white line angled up from the corner of his left eyebrow and disappeared in his shock of curly hair.

"That depends," the man said. She wondered if she should feel complimented or insulted by the look in his eyes, decided on the former and smiled.

"On what?"

"Let it pass," the man said. "What time does Morgan get here?"

"He should be here now." Her tone was crisp again. She rummaged in the top drawer and took out a notebook and pencil. "Name, please."

"What do you care?" He was still smiling.

"If you feel that way about it, I don't." One thing about Humphrey, he wasn't rude, she thought. He could take this guy with one hand tied behind him, even if the man on the couch was a six-footer.

"It's Michael Burke."

She wrote the name down. "Address?"

"Never mind that."

"What did you want to see Mr. Morgan for?"

"He finds missing persons, doesn't he?"

"Yes." She pointed to the door. If you stood outside, you could read this information on it:

MORGAN AND COMPANY
HEIRS FOUND—MISSING PERSONS
LOCATED

Oscar Morgan, President
Humphrey Campbell, Vice-president

"I want him to find me." He cocked an eyebrow at her and looked more like a devil than ever—a very happy devil.

She tried to find a suitable bit of repartee, but Oscar saved her the trouble. He barged into the office with his assistant in tow, threw a greeting at her, looked hopefully at the man on the couch, and went into the inner office. There was nothing of the bloodhound about Oscar. He didn't look like a man who could find a missing elephant on the Kansas prairie. If Captain Kidd had been fat and red-faced, with a crop of bristly white hair and shaggy eyebrows, he would have resembled Oscar. In spirit, Oscar was Captain Kidd. He had the face of a saint—perhaps a minor saint—and the soul of a pirate.

His assistant was a lump of a fellow with a merry brown face. He wasn't fat; he just seemed fat. As always, he examined Miss Gates with a speculative

eye; and as always, the memory of what had happened to his predecessor in the Morgan office, one Robin Bishop, gave him pause. Mr. Bishop had let his roving eye rest on the former secretary, and that had been the end of his freedom. Humphrey said, "Good morning, Gertrude," and let it go at that.

"Which is Morgan?" Burke asked when the door swallowed Humphrey.

"The fat one."

"Which fat one?"

"Mr. Campbell isn't fat—that's muscle."

"How do you know, babe?" Burke stood up and tucked a package under his arm. "Tell the boys I'm here, because I'm going in." And with that he followed Morgan and Company into the inner office, closed the door, marched up to Oscar's desk, and stood looking down at the fat man, who was pouring a shot of whisky into a tumbler.

"First one today." Oscar gulped the whisky, shuddered and gazed at the visitor. "Come right in, my dear fellow," he said. "Don't stand on ceremony."

"Thank you." Burke pulled a chair close to the desk, put his thin hips on it. He hiked up his coat in back a little, and then Humphrey saw the butt of the gun.

"By God, it's the lone ranger," Humphrey said. He lolled in the leather armchair in the corner, a lopsided smile on his puckish face, his long legs outstretched. "Don't shoot, pardner."

Burke shoved the gun-butt out of sight, opened the package and pushed its contents across the desk. Oscar looked down at a worn little book with a blue cover, a faded pink envelope, three pictures and two photostatic copies of birth-certificates. He said: "Well, well!"

"I'm Michael Burke," explained the other man. "I found those in a trunk."

"Whose trunk?" Humphrey slid lower in the chair.

"My grandmother's."

OSCAR kept silent and looked wise. In a sense, he was—wise enough to let his assistant do the work. That's what he kept Humphrey around for.

"Go on," Humphrey said. "Where do we come in?"

"I want you to find out who I am." Burke's brown hands rested on the desk edge, the long, supple fingers spread out as though getting ready to play a tune.

"We could ask the cops," Humphrey suggested.

Oscar gave his assistant a piece of a frown. "Please, Mr. Campbell."

"A humorist," Burke said

Humphrey seemed to be interested in the bit of sky above the old building across the street. He wasn't. He was wondering why Burke lugged a gun around in his pocket. "Who do you think you are, Mr. Burke?"

"I'll let you decide that," Burke said. "I'll begin at the beginning." Humphrey's nod indicated that was a good idea. Burke went on: "In the San Joaquin valley about fifteen miles west of Joaquin there's a town called Chanford. A little place on the river. Couple of miles up the river there's a ranch—the Sycamores. It's a big place of four or five thousand acres. Some of it's rich oil land."

"Oil," said Oscar, and licked his lips.

BURKE ignored the interruption. "It belongs to a family called Dunecht," he went on. "The original owner was Senator Horace Atwill Dunecht. Maybe you've heard of him. He was a United States Senator, and some people still refer to him as a robber baron." His smile was approving. "The Senator is dead, and the master of the joint now is his son, Stephen Dunecht. Stephen has two kids by his first wife, who died a long time back, and a stepson by his second. The stepson doesn't fit into the picture, so we'll skip him. He left the place after the second Mrs. Dunecht died ten or twelve years ago. The son's called Harry, and he's an attorney in Joaquin—a big shot. Ella's the daughter. She's married to a bird named Alex Carpenter, and he runs the ranch because Stephen Dunecht is a cripple. He broke his back in some sort of an accident."

"You've done some nosing around," Humphrey said.

Burke nodded. "Oh, yes. You'll understand why when you see the whole set-up. I'll return to the Senator: He had a wife named Cordelia. That was Stephen's mother. One night she ran off with the foreman. Left the Senator and the boy and beat it with the foreman, and never came back."

"Women!" Oscar's gesture was expressive.

"There you go, jumping at conclusions," Humphrey said. "Maybe the Senator was a louse. Go on, Mr. Burke."

"Cordelia was my grandmother."

"I guessed that," Humphrey said. "Was the foreman Grandpa?"

"That's what I want to find out," Burke said. "That's why I came to you.

I don't think he was. I think the Senator was my grandfather. I think my father and Stephen Dunecht were brothers."

Oscar sighed. There was no sadness in the sound. Humphrey slid out of the chair, went to the desk and picked up the material Burke had brought. He returned to the chair and sat there with the stuff in his lap. "You're sure Cordelia was Grandma?"

"I'm certain of that," Burke said. "The proof is in your lap."

"When did Cordelia beat it?"

"Christmas eve, 1893."

"How old was she?"

"Thirty-five."

"And the son, Stephen?"

"Fifteen. The Senator was around fifty."

"Stephen was the only child?"

"At that time he was. Grandma had her second—my father—July 5th, 1894."

"Where?"

"In Eastredge."

"His name?"

"Paul Dunecht Burke."

"The foreman's name was Burke?"

"I don't know," Burke said. "It may have been. His first name was Larry. That's all I'm sure of."

"It must have been Burke," Humphrey said.

The other shrugged. "What his name was, doesn't matter. He wasn't around when my father was born. Where he went, I don't know. But between the time Grandma ran out on the Senator and turned up at her sister's home in Eastredge, Larry disappeared."

"If we take this case, we'll have to find out what happened to him," Humphrey said. "Go on."

"As I said, Grandma ran off on Christmas eve," Burke continued. "Some months later, she showed up in Eastredge without the foreman. By the looks of things, her sister, a woman named Mrs. Harriet Whitsett, sent her the money for the trip. The day my father was born, Grandma died. Mrs. Whitsett took my father over."

"There's a chance the foreman is your grandfather. Right?"

"Right," Burke said. "If there wasn't, I wouldn't be here. I'd be in probate court with a lawyer, grabbing off half that property."

"A cagey bird," Humphrey thought, looking at the young man. He said: "Let's go back to the Senator. When did he die?"

"In 1912."

"Leave ■ will?"

"No will."

"Then if you're the Senator's grandson, you're entitled to half the estate."

"I know that. I looked up the law."

"You've looked up a lot of things."

"Wouldn't you?"

"You're damned right," Humphrey said. "Where's your father?"

"Dead. In 1918."

"War?"

Burke nodded. He said without emotion: "Don't know where he's buried. Maybe he's the unknown soldier. He was killed in France."

"Your mother?"

"She's dead too. Died in 1920."

"What happened to you?"

"A lot of things," Burke said dryly.

"We won't go into that."

"This Mrs. Whitsett—your great-aunt. What happened to her?"

"I'm coming to that." Burke stretched, and his shoulder muscles seemed to be trying to rip the seams of his coat open. "She died three months ago. January 20. No relatives but me. Left an old house and a little money. Mine. I went up there and in the attic I ran across ■ trunk. My grandmother's. That stuff"—he pointed to Humphrey's lap—"was in it. Take a look."

Humphrey picked up the blue book with the worn cover. "This," he said, "seems to be Grandma's diary."

THE book smelled of moth-balls and mold, and on the cover was proof that it was Grandma's diary. Her name was there, stamped deep in the leather—*Cordelia Dunecht*. Grandma, it turned out, was no mean penman. Each letter was ■ masterpiece, and every now and then she had taken time off to create ■ swan or an elaborate initial. The first page bore the date: "January 1, 1893."

Burke spoke. "Skip over to September. That's when it gets interesting."

Humphrey leafed through the yellow pages, and then he started to read, and only the faint whir of the electric clock and the rattle of traffic in the street six stories down broke the silence. Oscar sat with his chin on his chest ■ though deep in thought. He wasn't. He was dozing. Burke took out ■ file and went to work on his nails.

Gradually the shadowy figure of Grandma Dunecht, dead some forty-five years, emerged, given life again by those carefully formed and faded letters, let-

ters that were grouped into words and words that were grouped into sentences. A religious woman, was Grandma; a woman with a deep faith in the efficacy of prayer. She had loved poetry, the Bible, those rare visits to the city in the buggy, those Sunday morning services in the little Chanford church. And always over her, it seemed, fell the shadow of the Senator, her husband. She didn't say it, but you knew, reading those entries, that she was scared to death of him.

As he read through September, a month of sun and wind and brown hills, Humphrey detected a subtle change in Grandma. She began to perk up a little, to talk less of Mr. Harris, the preacher, and more about sunsets and sunrises and wild geese flying over and the glories of the distant sunburned hills. There was a reason. His name was Larry and the Senator had hired him to run the Sycamores.

The entry for September 21, 1893, read:

He drove me to Chanford today. Horace went to Madera after breakfast and left word that Larry would take me. He sat beside me, straight and tall, holding the reins. Only when I wasn't looking, I know he cast covert glances at me. Once his hand touched mine and he smiled. Oh, dear God help me. What will I do? I love him. I love him.

It was dusk when we came back along the river road and in the flat there were two white cranes. He pointed to them. "Lost souls," he said. "The lost souls of sinners." And he laughed. "You think that sinners are lost, don't you, Cordelia?" That was the first time he had said my name. I tried to reprimand him, but could find no words. So I was silent. As we came into the drive, he caught my hand. "Is there any hope for a mad Irishman, Cordelia?" I couldn't speak. I ran up the stairs to my room and lay on the bed and over and over I heard his sweet voice asking that question.

September gave way to October, and there was a good deal of praying done in Grandma's bedroom and a whole lot of sighing and many bold glances from Larry—Larry with the golden hair and the build of ■ Hercules—who rode like the wind and inspired Grandma to cull from her Home Book of Verse some choice bits of lyricism. But Grandma's upbringing was a barrier that even the agile Larry couldn't get over at once. As her love for him grew, so too did her

sense of duty. There was Horace, stern, bitter, violent and unloved, but her husband—the man she had taken for better or worse. And there was Stephen, a reserved, quiet boy who seemed happiest when off in the hills after the cattle. Stephen, according to Grandma, idolized Horace and the only person in the world Horace showed any affection for was Stephen. If Grandma did more than let Larry ogle her and touch her hand once in a while, she didn't mention it. But she did mention that she adored him—over and over again as though the saying of it put beauty on the wintry world.

According to the diary, Grandma didn't let Larry kiss her until November 2, his birthday. That is, she mentioned a kiss for the first time on that day. The entry read:

I was on the far slope of Bald Hill when he came riding along the trail from Pollasky. The sun was bright but the wind was very cold and in the hollows the frost still lay, though it was almost noon. I was standing there by the trail looking down into the valley and he dismounted and without a word took me in his arms and kissed me. Dear God forgive me, forgive me. The fire is still in my heart. "Your birthday gift to me," he said and without another word he leaped into the saddle and rode away. But down the trail he turned and I could hear his wild laughter coming back to me. Horace was waiting in the library when I returned and I went before him, trembling with fear. But if he saw my perturbation, he didn't speak of it. "I'm sending Stephen to San Francisco tomorrow," he said. "To school."

Grandma mentioned no more kisses. But she confided to her diary that there was a battle raging in her heart—a battle between love and duty. The Home Book of Verse yielded several pointed poems on the subject, all of them holding forth that love was a good deal more fun than duty any day of the week. On December 23, love won. She wrote:

My mind is made up. I can live like this no longer. God forgive me.

And on that 24th day of December, so many years ago, she made a single entry:

Tonight I go with my beloved, forfeiting my world and my son for my adored.

Then Grandma had laid aside her pen. She didn't pick it up again until July 3,

1894 and when she did she put a lot of blank pages between her and the night she let her world go hang for love. She wrote:

Again I know peace. Only a few days more. I want a boy—another son. Paul, that will be his name, after my dear brother who died so long ago. I am not afraid. Why should I be when the worst that can happen is for death to come. I don't fear death. There is so much far worse than death. There is that night of wind and darkness on the bridge—and the blackness of the pit. There is a door and a stone. Oh, God, forgive him.

On the next page was one sentence in another hand:

July 5. Died, Cordelia Dunecht, giving birth to a son, Paul. May God have mercy on her soul.

Humphrey closed the book and sat looking at it, the dead past crowding around him, the shadowy figures of Grandma and Larry and the Senator moving about in the shadowy world.

BURKE'S voice brought him back to the present.

"Romantic, wasn't she? An all-for-love and-the-world-well-lost sort of person. That's her picture," Burke said.

Grandma stared pensively at Humphrey. She stood beside a table with a glass bell on it and under the bell were two doves. Her dress did its best to hide the fact that she had a figure. Seeing the dress he understood why women were more virtuous forty or fifty years ago. In an outfit like that it wasn't hard to be godly. He decided that she had been a beautiful woman and he didn't blame Larry for coveting his boss' wife.

There were two other pictures. One was obviously a likeness of the Senator—an austere gentleman in a frock coat, with sideburns and a generous mustache. He had a thin face, a narrow skull and a look on his face caused either by plain damned meanness or chronic belly-ache.

"Now look at the other," Burke suggested. "That's Father."

Father wore a badly fitting uniform and an overseas cap and the picture had been taken in Hoboken. His face was thin and his skull was narrow and he looked pretty stern. There was a slight resemblance between the Senator and father. They didn't look like father and son, exactly, but there was a likeness.

Humphrey studied the picture and then he studied Burke's face and Burke seemed to understand what was on his mind. He said: "No. We're not alike. Except for the dark hair. I've my mother's face and head."

Humphrey turned his attention to the rest of the stuff in his lap. With interest he examined the photostats. One was from the Trinity County bureau of vital statistics and heralded the fact that Paul Dunecht had been born July 5, 1894, to Cordelia Dunecht. There was one vital bit of information missing. The space reserved for the father's name was blank. The certificate was signed by Dr. Daniel Bidwell. Humphrey looked up. He said: "I suppose this doctor is dead."

"Sure he's dead," Burke said.

The other certificate was complete. It was from the Placer County bureau of vital statistics and said that Michael Burke had been born April 3, 1914, and that his mother was Alice Burke and his father was Paul Dunecht Burke.

A pink envelope with a letter in it was the only other item. The envelope was addressed to Cordelia Dunecht, General Delivery, Sacramento. Carefully, Humphrey took the letter out and examined it. It wasn't long. Under the date, May 3, 1894, was this message:

My dear Cordelia: Enclosed you will find sufficient money for your fare to Eastredge. As you know, you leave the train at Redding and take the stage for the remainder of the journey. I have asked Mr. Welles, the driver, to be very careful on the grades.

No, I will not censure you, nor reproach you for what you have done. God, I feel, has punished you enough.

Your sister,

Harriet.

"The works," Burke said. "What do you think?"

"You have a case," Humphrey said. "How good a case, remains to be seen. If you're the Senator's grandson, your father and Stephen Dunecht were brothers, and Stephen's two children are your cousins. In that case we can get you half the Dunecht estate. You're entitled to it."

"That's how I figure it," Burke said.

"If you're the foreman's grandson, Stephen was your father's half-brother," Humphrey said. "But that means nothing. You're not entitled to a dime. Stephen owns the whole works and when he dies his two kids get it all."

"If." Burke's smile was cold. "Will you handle this?"

"Yes," Humphrey said, got up and put the bundle on the desk. Oscar was fast asleep. He came to life when Humphrey kicked him on the shin. "We certainly will," Humphrey said.

"Ah," said Oscar. He wet his lips and fumbled in the top drawer, came up with a legal-looking document. It was one of the standard Morgan contracts giving the firm a fifty-percent interest in any and all claims and settlements made for a client.

"Here we are." Oscar put his palms together. "Routine matter. Sign this please. How about a drink?"

"Fine," Burke said and looked at the contract while Oscar found two paper cups and filled them with whisky. "What's this fifty-percent business, Morgan?"

"Usual," said Oscar.

Burke laughed and it wasn't a pleasant laugh. He said: "You thieving—"

"Sir, I resent that." Oscar drew himself up.

"Fifty percent," Burke said. "Jesus! And they pinch guys for robbing banks. I got to hand it to you."

"I'll have you understand, sir, that this is a reputable firm," Oscar said. He emptied his cup, filled it again, gave Burke a hurt look.

Again Burke laughed. Oscar said: "If you feel that way,"—he frowned magnificently—"perhaps we'll make an exception. We'll reduce our percentage. Cut it in half. Yes, that's what we'll do."

REACHING for a pen, Burke drew a line through the fifty and wrote in twenty-five, initialed the change, signed his name at the bottom. Then Oscar initialed the change and signed it. He pushed the buzzer and when Miss Gates appeared he had her notarize the contract.

Burke kept his eye on Miss Gates and you could see he wasn't thinking about her intellect. She gave him a coy look and went out, wiggling her hips.

"Not bad," Burke said. "Some day I think I'll open an office. What do we do now?"

"Leave everything to us," Humphrey said. "Where can we get hold of you?"

"You can't," Burke said. "I'll call you first thing in the morning. So long." He ignored the door leading into the hall and went into the outer office. They could hear him talking to Miss Gates.

Humphrey picked up the phone, flicked a switch at the edge of the desk and dialed a number. A man answered

it. His name was James Patridge and he ran a private detective agency. "Jimmy," Humphrey said, "there's a bird on the way out. Follow him home. His name is Michael Burke and he was born in Placerville. See what you can find out about him."

"Will do," Jimmy said.

"What's that for?" Oscar asked.

"Fun." Humphrey put his finger on the buzzer. Miss Gates opened the door.

"Yes," Miss Gates said stiffly.

"Enter." Humphrey flopped back in the arm-chair. "Fix your lipstick and take a letter. If I were you I wouldn't get too chummy with this Mr. Burke, because he looks like a wrong guy."

Miss Gates' eyes told him to mind his own business. She went back to her desk, spent a couple of minutes with her makeup kit and mirror, returned with a notebook in her hand.

"Stephen Dunecht, the Sycamores, Chanford, California," Humphrey dictated. "Dear Sir: We have been employed by one Michael Burke—"

He had finished dictating and Miss Gates was at her desk hitting the typewriter keys as though she was afraid of them, when the phone rang. She answered it, transferred the call to Oscar's desk. Burke was on the other end of the wire. He wanted Humphrey. He said, "You put a tail on me again and I'll come up and kick your teeth in." Then he hung up.

Oscar's eyebrows went up. He asked, "Well?"

"That was Burke," Humphrey said.

"I know it. What did he want?"

"To play rough," Humphrey said.

"So?" Oscar poured himself another drink.

"So I'm going to Chanford on the next plane," Humphrey said. "You can tell Gertrude not to send that letter."



CHAPTER III

THE stewardess threw a look at the checkerboard of the earth and said: "Joaquin." She smiled at Humphrey, and he wondered if it would be worth while to go on to San Francisco. When

she gave the same smile to the other passenger, he decided against it. She was probably in love with the pilot anyway, and maybe she didn't look so good out of her uniform.

"Nice trip, wasn't it?" she said, looking at the other passenger. He was a big fellow in an unpressed flannel suit. He had a good-natured bony face, and his broad-brimmed gray hat couldn't hide the fact that he needed a haircut.

"Swell," the other passenger said.

"Going back by plane?" she wanted to know.

"I don't think I'll go back," the other passenger said.

"I plan to hitch-hike," Humphrey said. "You meet a lot of nice people that way."

The plane jolted a little, settled back on its tail, moved smoothly down the field. Humphrey looked at the suitcase in the aisle again. There was a Key-West-Havana ferry sticker on it, and that made him wish he were in Havana.

"Here we are," said the stewardess. The door opened. The other passenger held her hand for a minute, then went down the runway.

"You know who that is?" asked the stewardess, watching him go.

"You know who I am?" Humphrey asked. He took her hand too.

"Let me guess," said the stewardess. "And that's my hand you're squeezing."

"I'm Jack Armstrong, the American boy," Humphrey said, and let her hand go. He followed the other passenger into the warm spring sunshine.

They went across the field to the stucco imitation of an old Spanish mission, and through a gate; and inside the gate there was a young woman with red-gold hair so fine that it was like froth when the wind caught it. At first glance, her mouth seemed too big and her blue eyes set too wide apart. Then she smiled, and she was beautiful. The smile was for the other passenger. "You're Jay Martin," she said, and there was something about her voice that did things to you inside.

The other passenger put his grip down. "Correct," he said. "You must be Katherine."

Humphrey gave her another look and wished his name were Jay Martin. He started past them into the station.

"Can we drop you in Joaquin?" Jay Martin called after him.

Humphrey stopped, turned. "Thanks. I'm going to a place called Chanford."

"So are we," Jay Martin said. "We'll give you a lift."

"That's right nice of you, stranger," Humphrey said. "My name's Campbell."

"It's the spirit of the old West," Jay Martin said. He rumbled when he talked. "This is Katherine Mesdrell."

"Hello," Jay said and took her hand. "I suppose you know all about me."

"Quite a lot," the girl said.

"That's bad."

"Why?" she asked.

"You know I'm a tramp. How are Harry and Ella?" He didn't look good-natured any more. The names made Humphrey examine the big fellow with added interest.

"They're fine," Katherine said.

"No, they're not," Jay said. "They never could be fine. They're the reason I went away."

SHE didn't answer, but led the way through the stucco building to the parking-lot where a station-wagon stood, and slid under the wheel. Humphrey put his suitcase in back, followed it. Jay got in beside her. "A couple of carp," Jay added.

Without speaking, she put the car in gear, swung away from the curb, drove to the road at the end of the field and headed west. There were vineyards and orchards and squares of alfalfa on either side, and every once in a while there were houses and barns. Humphrey took the little blue book out of his pocket and began rereading it, but he had a hard time keeping his mind on Grandma's story, because Jay Martin was asking questions, and the girl was answering them in that odd, sweet voice of hers.

"I suppose you're a nurse," Jay said.

She shook her head. "No. A school-teacher."

"You don't look like a school-teacher."

"Don't I?"

"Not prim enough," Jay said. "How did Harry find you?"

She kept her eyes on the road. "With an advertisement: '*Wanted. Student of English and American literature to read aloud to invalid.*' Something like that."

"Must have beautiful voice and blue eyes," Jay said.

She laughed. "It didn't say that."

"So you answered the ad. And there was Harry looking down his thin nose. Handsome Harry, the carp."

"You're unfair," she protested. "I like Harry."

"You can have him. Did he demand references?"

"I have wonderful references."

"From your former pupils?"

"I never had any pupils. They never gave me a chance to teach, because there were no jobs. That's why I answered the ad. The references were from my instructors at college."

"I have known the bearer for four years and find her sound of wind and limb," Jay said. "Does Ella approve?"

"She hasn't said. She has been nice to me. She seems glad I'm there."

"She would be." Jay's voice was bitter, Humphrey decided. "Less for her to do. What's her husband like?"

"He's quite nice," the girl said.

"Poor devill" Jay said. He swung around and looked at Humphrey. "Relatives."

"I keep mine in concentration-camps," Humphrey said.

"That's a good place for them."

"Don't be bitter," Katherine said. She slowed for a turn. "I don't like bitter people. Where did the letter catch up with you?"

"New York." Jay was looking at her again.

"It was addressed to Key West."

"I wasn't there to get it. I was in New York."

"I'd like to go to Key West."

"I'd like to take you there," Jay said.

Humphrey put the diary back in his pocket. He decided this Martin guy was a fast worker, and wondered what he did for a living. He didn't wonder long.

"Are you a good newspaper-man?" Katherine asked.

"I'm no Richard Harding Davis," Jay answered.

"Are you drunk all the time? In pictures they are."

"All the time. I have a troupe of little men following me around. Little men with green beards."

The road topped a rise. Below them was the river twisting through a tangle of trees. They went down a bluff, and then they were in a little town, with cottonwood trees shading the old buildings.

"This is it," Jay said. "That's the hotel over there."

IT wasn't much of a hotel, a two-story affair with a balcony sagging over the porch and a weathered sign announcing rooms and meals. Humphrey got out of the car and put his two grips on the pavement. "Thanks for the lift," he said.

"You're welcome, pardner," Jay said. The girl threw a smile at him and the

station-wagon started on away, headed north. Humphrey read the inscription on the back without surprise. "The Sycamores," the inscription said. He stood looking after the car until it disappeared around a bend; then he turned. A slab of a man in a collarless white shirt and dirty khaki pants was lugging his bags up the steps.

HUMPHREY followed the man through a screened door into a dingy lobby with linoleum on the floor and spittoons beside the worn leather-covered chairs. To the right of the desk, the wall sported a picture of Custer's Last Stand, apparently filched from some ancient saloon. Right under it was a campaign poster with Herbert Hoover's picture on it. The man turned, stuck out a moist hand and showed Humphrey some crooked teeth. "Welcome to Chanford," the man said. "The name is Owens. Marshall Owens." By the looks of things, Mr. Owens had put his face through a piece of plate glass at some time in his career. It was seamed with scars.

"My name is Campbell," Humphrey said. He wondered if all the steady boarders at the hotel were as undernourished as Mr. Owens.

Owens interpreted the questioning look in Humphrey's eyes, put his hand up to his scarred face. "War," he said.

"Too bad," said Humphrey.

The door behind the desk opened, and a scrawny woman with lank and thin black hair gave him a toothy grin. "Good morning," said the woman.

"Mother, this is Mr. Campbell," Owens said. "He's a drummer. This is my wife, Mr. Campbell."

"Be here long?" Mrs. Owens emerged, put her elbows on the desk. She made Humphrey think of a housekeeper in a horror play.

"Probably," said Humphrey.

She shoved the register at him. "You get a rate. Buck and a half."

"That's fine," Humphrey said. He wasn't thinking about the rate. He was thinking about Michael Burke. His name was scrawled near the top of the page, and opposite it was a date—March second. Humphrey pointed to the name. "Friend of mine."

She craned her neck, shot a glance at her husband. "That so?"

"How long was he here?"

"Don't remember," Mrs. Owens said. Her lips made a puckered seam across her sharp face.

"What's he selling now?"

"He aint selling," Mrs. Owens said.

"What's he doing?"

"He didn't say," Mrs. Owens said.

"Was he here before?"

Owens edged closer. "You a detective, brother?"

"Me?" said Humphrey.

"You," said Owens crossly. "You want a room?"

"With bath," said Humphrey, and signed his name. Owens picked up the grips and went up the creaking stairs. The room was a corner one on the front, and the grimy windows looked out on most of the town. One thing about the place, it had trees, and a character of its own.

"Phone's in the hall," Owens said. "Supper's six o'clock." He seemed a good deal less cordial now. Humphrey wondered if Burke had anything to do with it, or if the man just didn't like cops.

Owens went out, leaving the door open, and Humphrey didn't take the trouble to close it. He opened one of his grips, took his accordion out and put it carefully on the bed. Then he sat on the bed and looked at Grandma's diary; and when he came to the last entry, he read it over and over. Finally he put the book in his pocket, pulled the accordion across his lap and began playing "Blue Skies." The piece made him think of the girl called Katherine.

A noise by the door stopped his fingers. "Keep right on," a voice said. Turning, he saw in the doorway a tall, plump man with a ginger beard. It was a spade beard, and a very good one.

"That's pretty fine," the man said. "I'd sure like to play that good. I sure would."

"You play?"

"No," the man said and came into the room. "I got me a boy who does."

"Just keep him around to play for you?" Humphrey said.

THE man laughed. "That's a good one," he said. "In my band."

"Orchestra leader?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm Lester K. Winters," the man said. "I run the Pavilion."

"Draw up a chair, Mr. Winters," said Humphrey. "Any friend of accordion music is a friend of mine. What's the Pavilion?" He examined his visitor with interest, decided that Winters must be a local character.

Winters took off a pair of thick-lensed spectacles, wiped them on his shirt-front,

squinting the while as though the light hurt his eyes. "It's the joy spot of the county," he said sententiously. "Dancing, boating, music and"—he winked—"some nice girls."

"Oh," said Humphrey.

Winters frowned. "Don't misunderstand me, my dear young fellow. It isn't that sort of a place. The best people patronize the Pavilion. And I mean the best." He stood up, replaced his glasses, plastered a stray lock of graying ginger hair back with the palm of his hand. "Come down and look us over."

"How good is your accordion-player?" Humphrey asked.

"Pretty good," said Winters. "Yes sir, he's pretty good. You thinking of settling down here?"

"Maybe," Humphrey said.

"Musician?"

"Sometimes." He wondered if Winters was curious, friendly, or trying to drum up trade.

"Come and see us," said Winters, and took his dignity out of the room. In a little while Humphrey got off the bed, slid his revolver in his hip pocket and followed him downstairs.

A BLOCK from the hotel, opposite a forlorn-looking bank, there was a garage that had once been a livery-stable. A paunchy fellow without much forehead was glued to a chair in the shade, and he didn't seem even to be thinking. Humphrey's request for a car brought forth a couple of grunts, and after a while the man got up and led the way out back. He jerked his thumb at a six-year-old roadster.

"All I got," the man said.

"How much a day?" Humphrey asked.

"Five bucks. Fifteen, deposit."

Humphrey paid him. "How do I get to the Sycamores?"

"North on the river road to the bridge. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." He opened the door.

"Funny thing," the man said. "The last guy who rented her asked me that."

"I'll bet his name was Burke," Humphrey said.

The other nodded. "That's right. Guy with a scar."

"It's a small world," Humphrey said.

"You said it." The man wagged his head.

The motor had a few knocks in it, but it ran. Once on the pavement, it went along without too much clatter. The road followed the river for a way, then

went up the bluff to the top and along the edge of the bluff, and then Humphrey got his first glimpse of the Sycamores on the hill across the river. He stopped the car, sat there looking at the great white house with lawn sweeping down to the pasture land where the barns stood. The peaked roof of a tank-house rose above the trees behind the house. He wondered if the place had changed much since the night Grandma ran away. She must have thought a whole lot of Larry to chuck her share in it, he thought. Most women would forgo romance to get a whack at it. . . . Releasing the clutch, he moved on.

The road angled sharply left, dropped to the bottom land and then forked. One fork led across an old bridge, and a sign on the bridge warned the world that this was private territory. The bridge shook a little as the car crossed it. On the other side, a gate barred the way, and Humphrey stopped the car off the road and got out. But he didn't open the gate. He leaned against it, looking up the hill through a long tree tunnel. From this point you couldn't see much but trees. A weird cry startled him, and looking off to the left, he saw the barns and haystacks, and some peacocks feeding on top of one of the stacks.

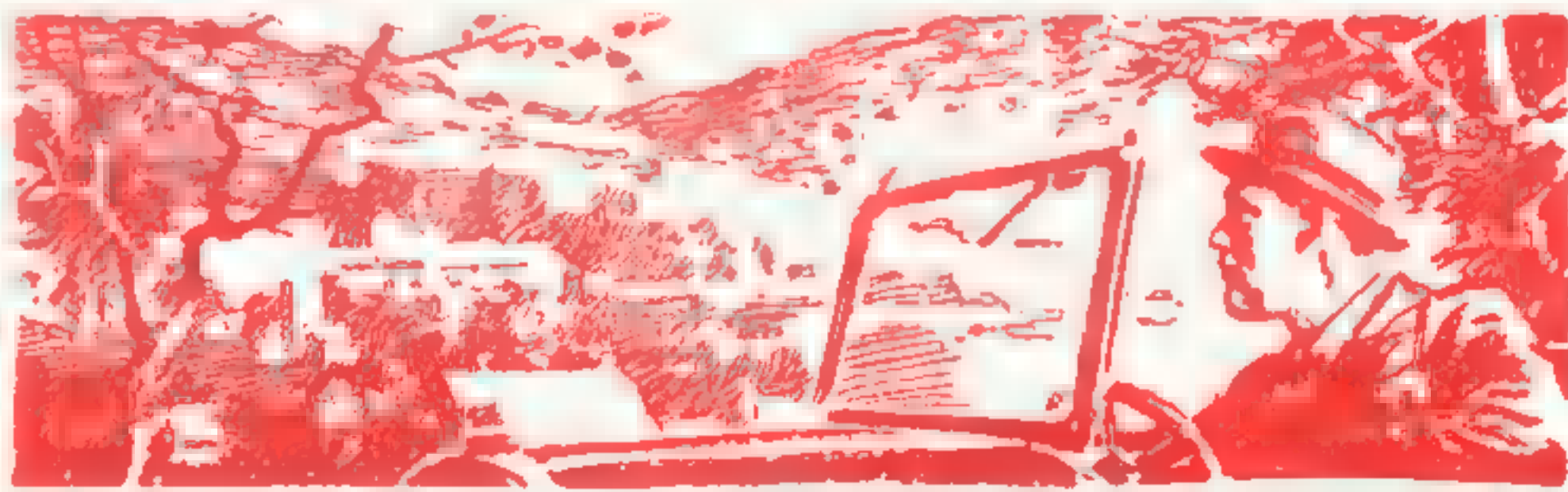
Again he took the little blue book out of his pocket and studied the last entry. He read: "*There is so much far worse than death. There is that night of wind and darkness on the bridge, and the blackness of the pit. There is a door and a stone. Oh, God, forgive him!*"

A bridge, he thought, turning. There was one, crossing the river on spindly legs. But where was the pit? South of the bridge there was the rich bottom land with its barns and its haystacks and its stretches of alfalfa. North, on this side, there was a tangle of willows and cottonwoods. It might be there.

He crossed the road and started fighting his way through the tangle north of the bridge. Presently he found a cattle-trail, and the going was easier. The trail meandered through the brush, then suddenly turned left and went up the hill. There was a good reason. Ahead, walled in by willows, yawned an old gravel-pit.

IT took him ten minutes to find a way to the bottom of the pit. To get there, he had to go down to the river and along the river; and then it was easy, for the cattle had made holes in the miniature jungle.

One by one, he followed the paths meandering through the willows. He examined the south wall and the east wall and found nothing. He had almost covered the north wall before he came on what he sought, and then the brush tangle almost caused him to miss it. Hidden by the willow screen were some rotten timbers. He pushed his way through the brush and stood in a little open space; and ahead of him, in the wall of the pit, was an old door, and the door was open a little. He slid through the opening; and when his eyes grew accustomed to the half darkness, he saw he was in a square room that had evidently been a tool-house or powder magazine. A pit, a door, a stone—the rigamarole made him think of "The Gold Bug." There was the stone, a big chunk of rock in the corner, and it took all his strength to pull it away from the wall. The one-by-twelves forming the wall were loose, and he tugged at one of them. It gave, and he was looking into a dark hole. His right hand fumbled in his pocket, found some matches. He lit one. In the recess back of the wall was a skeleton.



CHAPTER IV

THE door said, in trim gold letters: "HARRY PEARSON DUNECHT, *Attorney at Law*." Dunecht wasn't behind the door. Neither was his secretary. The room was empty.

Humphrey looked around him and was impressed. Mr. Dunecht, apparently, was successful—if you judged him by his waiting-room. It told you, by means of a framed document on the wall, that he was a Harvard graduate. It also told you he had severe and expensive tastes in office furnishings. There was a desk by the window, and stuck in the typewriter was a sheet of paper. Humphrey went over and looked at the paper. But it wasn't a note telling the world that the secretary was out to lunch and to wait a few minutes, please. It was a legal document—that is, it started out to be a legal document. The heading read: "*Last Will and Testament of Stephen Dunecht*." The only trouble was, the rest of the page was blank. Standing by the window, that gave him a fine view of the

main street of Joaquin if he wanted to take it, Humphrey hunted on the desk top for the original of the will, but it wasn't there.

A noise pushed him away from the desk, and he stood looking through the window at the ebb and flow of traffic in the street below. Behind him a door opened. A voice, charged with anger and bitterness, said: "All right, you lovesick fool. I'll do it myself."

He turned. A woman in tweeds slammed the inner-office door, threw one angry glance at him, and hurried out, leaving the scent of lilacs in her wake. Humphrey's only impression of her was that she was good-looking and that she was plenty angry. He smiled after her, went over and rapped on the door.

"Come in," a man called. The man sat at a carved antique desk with a slim vase by the inkwells, and in the vase was one Spanish iris. Certainly he didn't look lovesick. His cold eyes had contempt in them; his thin, dark face had a stony quality. The dark line of his eyebrows moved lower. He said: "Oh."

"No girl," said Humphrey, closing the door, "not a sign of a girl."

The cold eyes knifed at the intruder. The thin lips drew together. He looked thoroughly displeased with his visitor.

Humphrey said: "You're going to like me less when you know why I'm here."

"Yes?"

"Suppose I sit down." Humphrey didn't wait for an invitation. He sat. The chair was particularly uncomfortable.

"I'm rather busy," Dunecht said.

"I won't take long." Humphrey took out a cigarette, lit it.

"That's an ash-tray by the chair," Dunecht said.

"Thanks. Ever hear of Michael Burke?"

The thin, dark face was expressionless, but it seemed to Humphrey that Dunecht hesitated for a moment. He said: "No."

"I represent Mr. Burke."

"You're an attorney?"

"No. An investigator." He rose, put a card on the virgin blotter. Dunecht wasn't impressed. He offered Humphrey a fleeting, condescending smile.

"Mr. Burke says he's your cousin." Humphrey leaned back. "I'm inclined to agree with him."

"Mr. Burke is a liar."

"You'll have the opportunity to prove it, Mr. Dunecht."

"Why should I prove it?"

"Because we plan to lay claim to half the Dunecht estate," Humphrey said.

Again the condescending smile. "The proper place for your claim is the probate court, Mr. Campbell."

"Ordinarily. But this isn't an ordinary case. There's a murder involved," Humphrey said. "An old, old murder."

The word found a chink in the cold wall. The thin lips parted. The cold eyes had trouble in them. Dunecht leaned forward. "Forty-five years ago your grandmother ran away with the foreman," Humphrey said. "Today I found his skeleton. There's a bullet-hole in the skull."

DUNECHT'S fingers found a paper-knife, and the thin blade cut a hole in the air. There was a world of bitterness in the man's eyes.

"I think your grandfather put the hole there," Humphrey said. "He had cause."

Dunecht whipped a question at him. "What makes you think it's the foreman's skeleton?"

The blue book came out of Humphrey's pocket. He opened the book, rose and put it on the blotter. His finger pointed to the last entry. "Read it. Your grandmother wrote it."

Dunecht read it. The muscle in his cheek started twitching.

"I found the pit," Humphrey said. "And the door and the stone. I moved the stone, and there it was."

Dunecht stood up, turned his back to Humphrey, stared through the window. He said: "The gravel-pit by the bridge?"

"Yes."

"Who knows about this?"

"You and I."

"How about Burke? Does he know?"

"I haven't told him."

The attorney swung around. "How much, Mr. Campbell?"

"This isn't a shake-down," Humphrey said.

Dunecht laughed bleakly. "What is it, then?"

"I could have gone to the Sheriff," Humphrey said. "I didn't, because I see no reason to. This is a family matter. I came to propose a quiet investigation. If that's the foreman's skeleton, your grandfather was a murderer. You know what a row that will raise. I feel we should take this matter up out of court. There are several persons involved. I propose to bring them all together and talk things over."

"You're sure of yourself, aren't you?"

Humphrey shrugged. "I think Burke has a good case. We wouldn't have taken it, else. When you read that little book, I think you'll agree with me."

Dunecht opened the book again. He glanced at a few entries, then closed it as though it was distasteful. "How much?" he repeated.

"Mr. Burke's heritage," said Humphrey.

Dunecht grunted elegantly. He said: "Perhaps Mr. Burke is not the Senator's grandson."

"That's for a jury to decide," Humphrey said. "Unless—"

"Unless we pay off," Dunecht's voice was cold, precise. "And if we don't, you'll throw muck at us."

"You misjudge me," said Humphrey, trying to look hurt.

"I don't think so," Dunecht said, without anger. "You know what my father will say to all this, Mr. Campbell?"

"What?"

"He'll tell you to go to the devil," Dunecht said.

"And you?" Humphrey knew the answer to the question. The occupant of this office would do anything to avoid a scandal.

Dunecht looked grim. He said: "We'll discuss the situation with my father tonight. I'd bring this man Burke along, if I were you."

FROM his place over the mantel, Senator Horace Atwill Dunecht looked sourly down at the big living-room. It was a charming room; entering it for the first time you were a bit surprised, because it wasn't the sort of room you expected to find in this California valley. It had dignity and grace, and a faded lovely elegance that was a combination of past and present. Right now there were three men in it, and they didn't belong. That wasn't why the Senator looked sour. He always looked sour—the artist had painted him that way.

Oscar nodded at the painting. "Grandfather," he said hopefully.

"It all depends on Grandma," Humphrey said. "She may have been guilty of understatement about Larry's progress."

Burke laughed without humor, moved around the room. He stopped in front of an old desk and examined it. His manner was possessive, as he asked: "Do you think the shyster can talk his dad into settling this out of court?"

"I've a hunch he'll try."

Burke turned, stared at him, a half-smile on his face. "Finding the skeleton was a nice piece of work, Campbell. I knew about the gravel-pit. It didn't occur to me to connect it with the diary. If it had—" He flicked his thumb at Oscar.

"You would have saved twenty-five per cent." Oscar's smile was bland. Then the smile was replaced by an expectant look, for the door at the far side of the room was opening. The expressionless face of a Chinese peered at them.

"Mr. Dunecht will see you now," a monotonous voice said. "He will come to you." The face disappeared. A minute later he pushed a wheel-chair into the living-room, and in the chair was a white-haired man with huge shoulders.

A cold voice said: "By the table, Ch'en Tu. Then call the others, please." The Chinese went away. Stephen Dunecht examined his visitors, and there was no enmity in his glance. He seemed amused and curious. "You must be Burke." He smiled tolerantly at the man by the desk.

"I am," Burke said.

"I've seen you before. On the bridge."

"I was examining my inheritance." Burke's tone was insolent.

"You're sure of yourself, Mr. Burke." Again the glance of amused tolerance.

"Why not?" Burke said.

"Yes, why not." Stephen's eyes moved from Burke to the archway opening into the hall. Through it came three men and a woman. Humphrey wasn't surprised that the woman was the one he had seen in the lawyer's office. Jay Martin was right behind her.

"I'll be damned," Martin said, looking at Humphrey.

"You know him?" Stephen asked.

"We gave him a ride," Martin said.

"That's gratitude for you," Humphrey said. He bowed gravely to the woman standing now between Harry Dunecht and a dumpy, red-faced man with a bewildered young face and not much hair.

"This is Mr. Burke," Stephen smiled. "He wants to be your cousin."

"Not mine," Jay said. "I'm a step-child." He cocked an eyebrow at Burke, ran his hand over his shaggy hair. "Meet your cousins, Mr. Burke. This is Harry, and this is Ella." He seemed to be chuckling inside. "You'll love them."

"Same old Jerome," Ella said, acid in her voice.

"Don't call me Jerome," Jay said.

"I like the name," Ella said as she moved to a chair and sat in it. The red-

faced sophomore perched on the arm of the chair. Jay nodded to him. "And that's Alex Carpenter, your cousin's husband, Mr. Burke."

"You're not funny," Ella said. "Let's get started."

Stephen frowned. "Where's Katherine?"

"Upstairs," Ella snapped. "There's no reason for her being here."

"Call her," Stephen said gently.

"She's not one of us," Ella said.

"This is her affair," Stephen insisted. "Or it will be. Hasn't Harry told you?"

"He told me," Ella said.

"Then call her," Stephen said.

Ella looked up at her husband, jerked her head toward the door. Without a word he rose and hurried out and they heard him calling Miss Mesdrell's name. A moment later the girl appeared in the doorway, and though she didn't say it, you could see that she would be damned too by the sight of Humphrey. She crossed the room to Stephen's side, perched on a footstool near the wheel-chair. Stephen gave her a fond look, let his hand rest on her shoulder. "Now, Mr. Burke," he said.

BURKE'S smile was sardonic. "A family reunion," he said, and raised his eyes to the portrait. "To pin a murder rap on Grandpa."

"He's charming, isn't he?" Ella sent a smoking glance in Burke's direction.

Harry spoke for the first time. He said: "Mr. Burke, we are not here to listen to insults."

"No?" Burke said.

Harry's face was a white stone mask. "Lout," he snapped.

"Now, boys," Jay said. "That's no way for cousins to act."

Burke's eyes were deadly. Humphrey's voice whipped at him. "Suppose I do the talking, Mr. Burke?"

Jay examined Humphrey and there was interest in his glance. "That's a fine idea," he said.

"I take it Mr. Dunecht"—Humphrey indicated Harry—"has spread the news."

"A bit sketchily," Jay said. "Suppose you state your case."

Humphrey studied his thumbs. He said without looking up: "Mr. Burke came to us with what seems to be proof that he is the grandson of Senator Dunecht. Part of the proof—a diary—I have shown to Mr. Harry Dunecht. At the proper time we will produce it in its entirety. We had planned, at the con-

clusion of our investigation, to take the matter to court. This afternoon, as Mr. Dunecht may have told you, we stumbled on something that changed our plans." He paused.

Oscar put in unctuously: "We respect the Senator's memory." Humphrey shot a warning glance at him.

"That's sweet of you," Ella said.

"Suppose you come to the point," Stephen suggested.

Humphrey grinned at him, and the grin had respect in it. "You're aware, sir, that your mother ran away with the foreman."

Stephen's face was impassive. "I'm aware of that."

"A man named Larry," Humphrey said.

"Larry Pelham," Stephen said.

"Thanks," Humphrey rejoined. "We didn't know his name. We thought it might be Burke."

"It was Pelham." Stephen lifted his hand from Katherine's shoulder, fumbled with her hair. "Go on."

Humphrey took the diary from his pocket, opened it. "I'll read you the last entry Cordelia Dunecht made," he said, and read it. Then he closed the book and put it back in his pocket. "Today I went looking for a pit. I found it. I found the door and the stone. And I found a skeleton. I think it belongs to Larry Pelham. And I think the Senator knocked him off. What are we going to do about it?"

"That's the question," said Oscar solemnly.

"Not exactly," Stephen's eyes were very wise. "The question seems to be, how much?"

Oscar frowned. "My dear sir!"

"Well?" Stephen looked at Humphrey.

"Shall we go to court?"

"You can go to the devil." Stephen's voice was milder than ever.

"Father!" Harry crossed to the fireplace, stood in front of it. "Wait, please." His tone was coldly precise. He looked contemptuously down his thin nose at Oscar. "I've handled heir-chasers before. They're all the same."

"You insinuate—" Oscar's scowl was a beautiful thing. Humphrey, standing beside him, put his hand on Oscar's fat shoulder, dug his fingers into his flesh.

Stephen spoke again. "In justice to Mr. Burke, I think this matter should go to court. If his father was my brother, half of all this"—he waved his hand—"is his. I want him to have it."

Burke bowed. He said, with irony: "Thank you."

Stephen went on: "I grant that he may be my nephew. From what Harry has told me, my mother's diary points in that direction; your discovery of the skeleton seems to be added proof." He paused, and the humorous glint was gone from his eyes; then he added in a low bitter voice: "I said *seems* to be. Don't think for a moment I want to see the names of my father and mother dragged in the mud. In that respect, I hold with you, Harry. But I owe it to you four"—his glance included his son and daughter, his stepson and the girl on the footstool—"and you, Alex, to have the matter decided legally and honorably. If you prove to be my nephew, Mr. Burke, you will be given your inheritance immediately. Don't think that I blame you for bringing this matter up. Undoubtedly you have reason to believe you may be my father's grandson. I think you'll agree with me, though, that there is a doubt of it. And though that doubt involves my mother, I want it raised."

Again Burke bowed, but this time there was no mockery in his eyes. He said: "You don't look like Grandfather. But you've got his spirit, apparently."

"Thank you," Stephen said, and now he was the ironical one. "You may go. There's a lot for you to do. You see, you have to prove that skeleton was once Larry Pelham."

"Wait," Harry's cold voice put in. "I'm against it. I think we should make Mr. Burke an offer."

"I think we should throw Mr. Burke out," Jay said.

"Jay, please!" Harry protested. "How much will you take, Mr. Burke?"

"If he'll take a hundred dollars, it will make no difference." Stephen's voice was sharp.

"So be it," Burke said, and started for the door.

"Don't be a fool!" Harry sounded a little desperate. "How much, Burke?"

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars," Burke said.

"A right tidy sum," Jay put in.

COLOR flamed in Harry's face, but he kept his anger under control. He said quietly: "That's ridiculous. We'll give you ten thousand dollars."

"You're too generous," Burke's smile mocked him.

Stephen ignored them both. He said: "Call the Sheriff's office, will you, Jay?"

The mention of the law made Oscar sit up. He swallowed, and cast a desperate glance in Humphrey's direction. Then he relaxed, for Stephen added: "Mr. Campbell, will you remain here until the Sheriff arrives? I want you to report the finding of the skeleton."

Humphrey nodded, and watching the old man, he wished that Burke had taken Grandma's diary somewhere else. He didn't like Stephen's attitude. He was too sure of himself.

Harry turned to his father, started to speak. The old man silenced him with a look. "The matter must go to court," he said. "That's final."

And as far as Stephen Dunecht was concerned, that was final. But in the night something happened to change the whole picture, to make inconsequential the finding of the skeleton in the gravel-pit. In the night, Stephen Dunecht was murdered.



CHAPTER V

THE local sub-station of the county Sheriff's office which overlooked the river just south of the undertaking parlor, had five men and a skeleton in it.

The skeleton reposed in a wicker basket in the center of the dingy little room. You couldn't see it, because there was a piece of canvas draped over the basket. Lou Anders, the Sheriff, an imposing buck-toothed giant with a jet-black mustache, was responsible for the canvas. He didn't like skeletons, and you couldn't blame him. A heap of moldy bones is somehow prophetic.

Anders sat at the desk in the corner with a sheet of white paper in front of him, and on the paper reposed some rusty buttons, some rusty hooks and eyes that had once kept a pair of boots laced, and a tarnished silver belt-buckle, found when the skeleton was removed from its dark resting-place. Anders wasn't looking at the relics. He was looking at the other men in the room. Humphrey Campbell was perched on a long table by the wall, smoking a cigarette. Jay Martin stood by the door with his big hands in his pockets. Harry Dunecht sat stiffly on a chair near the window, and for the first time in his life he looked di-

sheveled. Even Harry couldn't fight his way through the brush to the gravel-pit without disturbing his elegance. The fifth man was a pale little fellow who seemed to be a jump ahead of pernicious anemia. His name was Otto Renick, and he was the county coroner.

"So you read the diary and found the skeleton," Anders said.

Humphrey nodded. "That's what I said."

"This Burke didn't know the skeleton was in the pit?"

"He told you that. He told me that."

"It looks damn' funny," Anders said.

"I don't care how it looks." Humphrey's voice was mild. "I'm telling you what happened."

"Why didn't you report this at once?" Anders had a thin, scratchy voice, much too thin for his bulk.

"I felt that Mr. Dunecht should be told first."

"I imagine you did." Anders looked wise. "How much dough did you ask for?"

"Not a dime." He motioned toward Harry. "Ask him."

"That's right," Harry said grudgingly.

"What makes you think that"—Anders nodded at the basket—"is Pelham?"

"What would you think?" Humphrey asked.

Anders grunted. He turned his attention to Harry. "Ever hear of Larry Pelham, Mr. Dunecht?" His tone was much more respectful now.

Harry nodded. "Vaguely. As a child, I heard people talking about my grandmother and the foreman."

"It's a local legend," Jay said. "The only scandal in the history of the town."

"Was murder mentioned, Mr. Dunecht?"

"No. Grandmother and the foreman disappeared," Harry said.

Jay turned on him. "Tell him the whole business, Harry. Be fair about it."

Harry's answer was a black look. Jay said: "When I moved to the ranch, Harry told me about the Senator and Grandma and the foreman. We used to play a game. He was the Senator, and Ella was Grandma. I was the foreman. The game always ended with me getting knocked off by Harry." He laughed. "Then Stephen found out, and we caught hell."

"Well, Mr. Dunecht?" Anders was still respectful.

"We were children," Harry said. "That's all there was to it."

"Then you heard no rumors that your grandfather had murdered Pelham?"

"None. On the contrary! You know the watch-tower on top of the tank-house? That was built after my grandmother disappeared. Ask some of the old-timers about it. They'll tell you that the Senator sat up there with his rifle on his knees, watching the bridge."

"That's right," Jay said. "They used to say the Senator was waiting to take a pot-shot at the foreman if he ever came back. He never came."

"If that's Larry in the basket, it's understandable," Humphrey observed.

Anders ignored him. He asked Harry: "Was any attempt made to find your grandmother?"

Harry nodded. "After Grandfather's death, Father hired a detective agency to look into the matter. Nothing came of it. The trail was cold."

The Sheriff sighed. "A hell of a note," he grumbled. "A forty-five-year-old murder bobbing up right now! As if I didn't have enough on my neck with one of my deputies getting the hell beat out of him over to Tumbleweed. If it hadn't been you, Mr. Dunecht, I wouldn't have come over tonight."

Harry nodded; then he asked: "What happened at Tumbleweed?"

"Them damn' fruit tramps!" Anders glowered. "Organizers stirred 'em up, made 'em strike on the Lovell ranch. I sent some boys, including Clem Risley from this sub-station, over to run 'em off, and the tramps rushed 'em with clubs. Risley was hurt bad." He looked at his watch. "It's eleven. We can't do any more tonight. I've got to go back to Joaquin and see who they rounded up. Tomorrow I'll run over and talk to your father." He frowned at Humphrey. "You'll be available?"

"At the hotel," Humphrey said.

"See that you are," Anders said, and motioned toward the door.

NOW the moon was up, and through the trees the river was a strip of crumpled silver foil. In the marsh on the far side there were a million frogs, and somewhere in the trees a night bird was crying. Jay stopped and looked up at the sky. "I'd forgotten how swell it was here," he said.

"Come on," Harry said. "It's late."

"It'll be later," Jay said. "I've got some wires to send."

"You'll walk home, then." Harry slid under the wheel of his big roadster.

"What a charming fellow you are!" Jay said. "I'd rather walk."

"Have it your own way," Harry said, and swung the car around. Jay looked after it and laughed.

"Nice guy," Humphrey said. "Go send your wires. I'll take you home. I owe you a ride."

JAY hesitated, then smiled. "All right. Let's go." They went north to the hotel and around the corner to the telegraph office, and Humphrey waited outside on a rickety bench. Across the street there was a café with a bar in it, and some men and women were at the bar. Now and then someone shoved a nickel into an automatic phonograph, and then you couldn't hear the frogs. Humphrey lit a cigarette and then another and that one had long been out, before Jay came out of the telegraph office.

"I need a drink," Jay said. "When I write a story like that one, I always need a drink."

"Story?"

"I'm still a newspaper-man," Jay said, and led the way to Bill's place. Leaning against the bar, he asked, "What are you drinking?"

"Milk," Humphrey said.

"Good Lord!" Jay said. He caught the bartender's eye. "One milk. One cognac."

"One what?" asked the bartender.

"Brandy," Jay amended. "—You know, I've finally placed you."

Humphrey sipped his milk. It was fine and rich and cold. "Me?"

"Reno," Jay said. "The Benedict case. The story came over the wire. It was a pip. How'd you get in the heir-chasing racket?"

"I was in it then. It's a fine honorable business."

"Like sticking up banks," Jay said. "Are you guys on the up-and-up in this one?"

"It looks like it."

"Why an attempted shake-down, then?"

"It wasn't a shake-down. At least not on my part. It was a fishing expedition—for information."

"Get it?"

"Some," Humphrey said.

They went back to the hotel and got in the rented car. When they went along the bluff, Humphrey looked across the river at the big house. Upstairs there were some lights burning, and there was a light on the porch. The living-room windows were dark.

Jay got out and opened the gate, and they went up the hill through the dark tree tunnel and into the graveled driveway, and the air was heavy with the smell of flowers. "Thanks," Jay said. He ran up the steps, and the front door closed behind him. Humphrey leaned on the wheel for a little while, looking at the great bulk of the house brooding in the moonlight; then he turned the car around and started down the hill. When he stopped at the gate and got out to open it, he saw someone move behind the big eucalyptus tree to the right of the bridge. He got back in the car, drove through, got out and closed the gate and took another look at the tree. Katherine Mesdrell was trying to hide behind the fat trunk, and it seemed to Humphrey that there was someone else with her. A rendezvous, apparently; the girl seemed to have plenty of admirers. He grinned, got back in the car and drove on.

His room was full of moonlight, and he stood at the window a long time looking at the pale ghost of the river, and then he wished it wasn't so late, because he wanted very much to play the accordion. But the citizens would probably object, even if it was good accordion music, so he abandoned the idea, undressed and slid between the rough sheets. But he didn't sleep. His mind was too occupied with the principals in an old, old tragedy.

A LITTLE wind ran through the old trees, and somewhere at the front of the house a shutter rattled. Jay turned from the window, moved to the bed and sat on the edge of it. Looking about, he was filled with a great longing for the dead years. His twenty-two rifle was in the rack on the wall, and his school-books were in the bookcase under the rack. He knew, without looking, that in the top drawer there would be a picture of a girl he had loved in high-school. Her name was Marian Hunter, and she was one of the reasons he had gone away. But Miss Hunter wasn't important any more.

There was a tiny fireplace in the corner, and over the mantel was his mother's picture, and he sat there looking up at the picture and remembering a thousand lost moments. He squirmed beside her on the hard bench in church and heard her whisper: "It will be over soon, darling." . . . A surrey rattled along the river road, and they were in the surrey looking up at the big house, and

Stephen was holding her hand and telling her that was her home. . . . Stephen was standing in the door of this room, his face white and drawn, saying in a cold dead voice that he would never see his mother any more.

He shivered, fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and brought out an empty package. There were some in the living-room. Automatically he got up, crossed the room to the door and went quietly down the hall to the stairs, and then he saw Katherine standing on the first landing in a patch of moonlight. She was looking up at his dark form, her eyes wide, her lips parted a little.

"It's only me," Jay said. "No cigarettes."

She forced a smile, came up the stairs to him, and then he was conscious that she was breathing quickly as though she had been running. He caught the scent of violets, and a strange excitement stirred in him. He asked: "Out with the moon?"

"Yes." Her voice was so soft he could barely hear the word.

"Alone?" And as he asked the question, he wondered why he wanted very much for her to tell him yes, she was alone.

"Of course." She put her hand on the stair-rail and asked, almost anxiously: "Who would be with me?"

"Perhaps Harry," Jay said.

"Why not?" she said. "I told you I liked Harry." She seemed relieved. "Good night."

"Good night, Katherine." He caught her hand.

She let him hold it for a moment, then pulled away and went down the hall. He stood looking after her, oddly disturbed; and when her door closed, he moved on down the stairs to the living-room, switched on the light and found a box of cigarettes on one of the little tables. He put one between his lips, struck a match and filled his lungs with smoke. A noise made him turn. Ch'en Tu stood at the door to the library, staring at him.

"Mr. Stephen—" The old Chinese seemed to be hunting for words.

"Yes, Ch'en." Fear gripped him.

"Dead," Ch'en Tu said, and put his face in his hands.

JAY pushed past him, through the library and along the hall to the big bedroom in the southeast corner. The door was open, and the room blazed with

light. He stopped in the doorway and stood looking at the figure on the bed, and a wave of horror and grief and rage swept over him. He cried out: "Oh, no."

Around Stephen Dunecht's neck was a braided hair rope, and the rope ran tautly up over the head of the bed. But the rope hadn't given him death. A wooden handle, worn smooth by much usage, protruded from his left breast.

Like an automaton Jay crossed to the bed, and his fingers sought Stephen's pulse, but couldn't find it. He let his hand rest on his stepfather's cheek for a moment, then went back to the living-room, picked up the phone, and dialed a number. A sleepy male voice said: "Yes."

"Get me Humphrey Campbell," Jay said in a voice drained of all emotion.

MARTIN said: "Sit down, Campbell." At that moment he was the image of a young-old Abraham Lincoln, tall, ungainly, loose-jointed, his bony face stamped with a terrible sadness.

Humphrey sat on the arm of the davenport and glanced at the banjo clock. It was one o'clock. "Did you call the Sheriff?" he asked.

Jay shook his head. "Not yet."

"Better call him," Humphrey said. He looked past Jay at the Chinese sitting bolt upright in a chair by the wall, like some old ivory statue.

"To hell with the Sheriff!" Jay said. "I got you out here for a reason. I think you can find out who killed him."

Humphrey didn't answer. Looking up, he saw the thin-skulled Senator staring sourly down at them. All he could think of at the moment was old Dunecht sitting in his tower with his rifle on his knees, watching the river road.

"You solved the Benedict case," Jay went on. "I want you to handle this one. Though you're tied up with a couple of thieves, I know you're not one of them. I don't know what your fee is, and I don't care. I want you to chuck Burke and Morgan and work for me. Will you do it?"

Humphrey stood up. "I can't chuck them, Martin. Right now, I don't know what the set-up is. The Burke business may tie in with the murder; and if it does, Oscar and I are in it up to our necks. So I've got to see that through. I'll work on the murder for you. To hell with the fee! You've got to trust me. You've got to take my word that I won't protect anyone."

"I'll trust you," Jay said.

"All right, then. Now call Anders. If you wait any longer, there'll be the devil to pay. It will take him three quarters of an hour to get here, and in that time I can get things pretty well under way. I'll have a look at the room. As soon as you put in the call, get the others up and bring them down here." He nodded to the Chinese.

Ch'en Tu inclined his head, rose and moved silently into the small, book-lined room where the coals still glowed on the hearth.

A moment later Humphrey stood in the center of Stephen Dunecht's bedroom and stared around him. It was a large, high-ceilinged room and there were big windows looking toward the east and toward the south. The windows were open and Humphrey went over and looked out. Moonlight showed him that there was a cement walk running along close to the wall. It was not more than five feet from the sills to the earth.

He crossed to the bed and looked at the body. There was no question as to how the cripple had been murdered. The bed stood away from the wall a couple of feet, and someone had stood behind it and dropped a noose over Stephen's head, jerked it taut, tied the other end of the rope to the leg of the bed and then stabbed him. From the look of the handle, the weapon was some sort of awl.

The man hadn't died without struggling. Both hands clutched at the rope circling his neck, and from one of them an electrical cord led to a connection in the wall beside the bed. Humphrey leaned closer, examining the left hand. It was closed tightly over a wooden bulb with a push-button on the end of it.

HUMPHREY whistled through his teeth, straightened up and studied the room again.

Beside Dunecht's bed there was a small table. On the table was a water-carafe, a glass, half-filled, a box of sleeping-tablets, a French phone, and a fountain pen. His gaze moved from the table to the maple dresser, past it to the wall near the door. On the wall was a picture of a woman with black hair; and the woman made him think of Jay Martin. She was beautiful, but there was something about her that reminded you of the loose-jointed newspaper man. It must be Jay's mother, he thought. It occurred to him that the picture was a little cockeyed, so

he went over, and covering his fingers with his handkerchief, swung it away. There was a safe behind it, and the safe was closed. He let the picture drop back into place, went along the passageway and into the library. Ch'en Tu was standing by a small table, looking down at it. On the table was a chess-board, and on the board were half a dozen ivory chess-men. Humphrey said: "One move from mate."

The Chinese didn't look up. He stood there eying the board, his shoulders bent a little.

"What time did you find Mr. Dunecht's body?" Humphrey asked.

CH'EN TU'S face was an expressionless mask. "Half after twelve."

"Why did you go to his room?"

"The red light was on."

"That's how Mr. Dunecht called you? With a light?"

"Yes."

"You saw it go on?"

"No. I awoke to find it on."

"What woke you?"

"Mr. Jay. My room is directly beneath his. The floor is old. It creaked, and I awoke."

"So you don't know how long the light was on."

"I have no way of knowing."

"When did you go to bed?"

"Shortly after eleven. I made Mr. Dunecht ready for the night and retired immediately."

"Was anyone with Mr. Dunecht when you left him?"

"No. He was alone."

"When he called you to put him to bed, was anyone with him?"

"Miss Katherine. They were here in the library."

"Where did she go?"

"She remained here by the fire."

"After you found the body, what did you do?"

"I looked through the windows, but there was no one. I heard voices and went into the living-room. Mr. Jay was there. I informed him of Mr. Stephen's death; then I went outside."

"See anything?"

"Nothing."

"How do you get into Mr. Dunecht's room?"

"Through the bath. A door leads into the hall to the kitchen."

"Your room is how far away?"

"Back of the kitchen. A considerable distance."

"Thanks," Humphrey said, and headed for the living-room. At the door, he looked back. Ch'en Tu was leaning against the chimney with his head on his arm. Humphrey wondered if Chinese ever cried.

They were all there, the whole lot of them—and not a tear was being shed. Some had been; you could tell that by looking at Katherine's eyes. But she wasn't crying now. Nor was Ella. She didn't seem to have a tear in her, for that matter.

Harry said: "There's no use asking questions, Campbell." He looked as hostile as Sitting Bull.

"Oh, for God's sake!" Jay said.

"This is a matter for the police, not for amateurs," Harry said.

"You'll see plenty of the police before this is washed up," Humphrey said.

"So will you," Harry said. "And your Mr. Burke."

"I wouldn't be surprised," Humphrey's voice was cheerful. "I need some information. Am I going to get it?"

"You are not." Harry looked around him for support. He got it from Ella. She shot a couple of glances at her bewildered husband before he was able to nod his head vigorously.

"Miss Mesdrell," Humphrey said, "will you answer some questions?"

She looked up at him, tried to speak. The words choked her.

"Let her alone." Harry moved to her, put his hand on her shoulder.

Jay's eyes had mayhem in them. He said something under his breath. Then he spoke to Katherine. "Please, Miss Mesdrell."

It seemed to Humphrey that there was more than grief in the girl's face, that there was fear too. Her answer was an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

JUST then the doorbell rang; Humphrey went into the hall and opened the door. If it hadn't been moonlight, he could have told who one of the visitors was by the smell of alcohol.

"Here we are," Oscar said. He lumbered into the room, and Burke was right behind him. Burke didn't smile. He nodded gravely to the men and women in the living-room, getting stony glances in return.

Harry said: "Why don't you ask Mr. Burke where he was tonight?"

"I intend to." Humphrey eyed the curly-haired young man.

Burke threw a dark look at Harry.

"You'd like to see them pin it on me, wouldn't you?" he said. Harry didn't need to answer. "I'll tell you where I was," Burke went on. "I was in my room. Ask Mr. Campbell, here."

"You were in your room when Mr. Martin called me," Humphrey said. "Where you were when Mr. Dunecht was murdered, I don't know."

"When was he murdered?" Burke was the coolest person in the room.

"Around midnight."

"He was alive at midnight," Burke said. "I talked to him on the telephone."

HARRY'S mouth came open a little. "You what?"

"I talked to him on the telephone," Burke reiterated. "He called me at the hotel around midnight."

"Let's have it," Humphrey said. "Go on."

"I'll digress." Burke's tone was mocking. "Mr. Morgan here will tell you what time I reached the hotel. It was a little after eleven, wasn't it, Mr. Morgan?"

"About that." Oscar sounded pretty rusty.

"Mr. Morgan and I stopped for a drink after the skeleton incident," Burke continued. "From the bar we went to the hotel. The man who runs the hotel will verify that. He was in the lobby. I went to bed at once. Was almost asleep when someone knocked on the door. I think it was Mrs. Owens, though I didn't see her. She said I was wanted on the phone, and for me to take it upstairs. I put on a dressing-gown and went out in the hall where the phone is. Stephen Dunecht was on the wire."

"You're lying," Harry said.

"All right. I'm lying."

"Why did Stephen call you?" Jay shot the question at him.

His answer stood them on their heels. "To tell me that wasn't Larry Pelham's skeleton. To tell me Larry Pelham is still alive."

There was an expression verging on the triumphant on Ella's thin face. She almost smiled. "Exit Mr. Burke and his preposterous claims!" Her tone was a taunt.

Burke said: "Perhaps, madam. Perhaps not. Your late father may have been lying."

Jay's hands became fists, and he took a step toward Burke. Humphrey's voice stopped him. "That would get us nowhere, Martin." Jay unclenched his fists.

"You're sure it was Mr. Dunecht?" Humphrey asked.

"Not sure, no. I heard his voice for the first time tonight. He said he was Stephen Dunecht, and I thought it was his voice. But I can't be sure."

"Did he say anything else?"

"He said that if I was wise, I would fade out."

"And you?"

"I told him I wouldn't fade." An angry note crept into his voice. "Why should I? There is good reason to believe that half this estate is mine. I won't be driven off by threats." Then mockingly: "We Dunechts have always been fighters."

Harry clouded over, and anger made him inarticulate. Alex looked more bewildered than ever. "Enough of that!" Humphrey struck a match on the sole of his shoe, stared through the flame at them all, put a cigarette between his lips and lit it. "Anders will be here directly. I won't be here to meet him, but assure him I'll be back, and that there's no need to send the gendarmes after me. I think it would be wise if the rest of you waited. Your absence might irk him."

"And your absence?" Harry's cold voice said.

"Will probably infuriate him," Humphrey said. "But that can't be helped." Whereupon, he left them.

THE hotel was dark, save for a pale light by the stairs in the dingy lobby. He stuck his finger on the night bell and kept it there until the door back of the desk opened and Owens' pale, scarred face appeared. The hotel-keeper ran his hand over his face, yawned, and blinked his watery eyes at Humphrey.

"What is it?" he asked crossly.

"Sorry to disturb you," Humphrey said. "I want to talk to your wife."

"She's asleep," Owens said. He came out and switched on the light. The flannel nightgown he wore was too big for him and gave him a scarecrowish quality.

"Wake her up," Humphrey said, and put his hand in his pocket. He brought out a badge and let Owens have a brief look at it.

"So you're a cop," Owens said. "I thought you were a cop." He padded back into his room, and his grumbling voice told Mrs. Owens to get up. She came out presently, her bony figure wrapped in a torn flannel robe, her lank hair in a braid down her back.

Owens came out after her.

"Did you get a telephone-call for anyone in the hotel around midnight?" Humphrey asked.

She nodded. "For Mr. Burke."

"Who called him?"

"Mr. Stephen Dunecht."

"Was Burke in his room?"

"Yes. I went up and knocked on the door, and he said who is it, and I said someone was calling him. I came back downstairs and waited until he answered upstairs; then I hung up this phone here"—she pointed to the instrument on the wall—"and went back to bed. I was just about asleep when somebody called you."

"That's a shame," Humphrey said. "So you just waited until Burke said hello?"

Owens answered the question for her. "What are you getting at, young fellow? Course that's what she did."

"Keep your shirt on," Humphrey said.

"That all you want?" Owens growled.

Humphrey nodded. "You might as well get dressed. There'll be more guys disturbing you. They'll be asking you the same questions, and they'll be looking for me. Tell 'em to wait. I'll be back." With that he went outside.

The moon was sliding down toward the trees, and there was a cold, damp wind off the river. He hurried south through a town that seemed to have been dead for centuries. Even the bar was dark now. The Sheriff's sub-station hadn't a light in it. He went around the old building to the back and tried a couple of windows. They were locked. One on the north side responded to the persuasion of a tire-iron he had taken from the roadster. He pulled himself up and dropped into the dark building, made his way cautiously toward the front, keeping his flash-light down so that its circle of light crept along the floor. When he reached the filing-cabinets, he began trying the drawers. They were locked, but the locks were cinches. In the bottom drawer he found what he sought, relocked the cabinets, walked through the front door and back to the silent hotel.

WHEN one of Anders' men appeared at the hotel ten minutes later and rapped on Owens' door, the hotel-keeper looked out and inclined his head skyward. "He's up there," he growled.

Humphrey heard him, came to the head of the stairs. "I'll go quietly, Officer," Humphrey volunteered.



CHAPTER VI

THE chess-men were gone. Anders sat at the little inlaid table with part of a greasy deck of cards in his fist. The rest of the cards were face up in piles in front of him. He took a card from the deck, looked at it, looked at the piles and put it down. "Going to show up the county constable, were you?" Anders said.

"Don't be so modest," Humphrey said. "And put that red queen on the black king."

"Who's doing this?" Anders left the queen where she was. "You're in a jam, young fellow. A hell of a jam."

"Me?" Humphrey said.

"Damn' right," Anders said. "Start talking. Whose idea was it?"

"What idea?"

"The murder," Anders said.

"You can't pin that on me, Sheriff. I'm in the clear, and so is Oscar. Burke seems to be."

"Seems." Anders was full of disbelief. "You know Burke's been hanging around this joint for weeks."

"You better talk to him about that. I saw him for the first time yesterday."

"Sure you did?" Anders said.

"I resent that."

"That's too bad, Mr. Campbell. Now quit stalling." He played another card.

"Where I come from, they use lights and peanuts. Sometimes pieces of hose."

"I'll get around to that. Now are you going to talk, or is the county going to feed you?"

"That's different," Humphrey said. "The trouble is, you know all I know. Burke approached us this morning—I mean yesterday. I came up here, found the skeleton, and turned it over to you."

"After you tried to shake the Dunechts down," Anders interposed.

"After we suggested an out-of-court settlement," Humphrey corrected. "I brought Jay Martin home and went back to the hotel. He called me that his stepfather was dead, and I came out here. There you are."

"You ran out of here in a hell of a hurry." Anders was eyeing him suspiciously.

"I wanted to check Burke's story about the phone-call."

"It took you all that time?"

Humphrey shook his head. "I made a call of my own. I called a private dick we use in Los Angeles, and asked him to come up here."

"Then you think Burke killed Dunecht?"

"Mr. Anders," said Humphrey, and his tone was guileless, "I work for a reputable firm. The firm is involved in a murder case, and it's my job to dis-involve it. It would be embarrassing if our client committed the murder. If he did, we want to know it so we can sever relations. If not, we want to help him press his claim against the Dunecht estate."

"It would be more than embarrassing." Anders leaned his elbows on the table. "Why was Mr. Dunecht murdered to-night?"

"I don't know, Mr. Anders."

"Doesn't it seem strange that the murder followed your appearance here?"

"It does."

"What's the connection, Mr. Campbell?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Tonight, after you dug a skeleton out of the gravel-pit, Mr. Burke offered to settle his claim against the Dunecht estate for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Mr. Stephen Dunecht refused to settle. Mr. Dunecht told you to take the matter to court. Now he's dead. What does that look like, Mr. Campbell?"

"It seems to add up, doesn't it?"

Anders nodded, played another card, studied the layout for a moment. Looking up, he asked: "Where's Pelham?"

"I think you've got him in the morgue."

"You heard what Burke said about the phone-call from Mr. Dunecht?"

"I heard," Humphrey said.

"Well, where is he?" Anders persisted. "You're hiding him out."

"You think Pelham killed Mr. Dunecht?"

"Bright boy."

"He did pretty well for an old man," Humphrey said. "He ought to be around seventy-five."

"My old man's seventy-eight, and he could have done it."

"Maybe he did," Humphrey said.

"QUIT fooling!" Anders snapped. He half rose, shook his finger at Humphrey. "Where's Pelham?"

"As far as I know, he's in the morgue."

Humphrey was imperturbable. "Until

that skeleton turns out to be someone else, I'm going to insist he's in the morgue."

Anders sat down again and picked up the cards. His tone grew reflective. "I could lock you up, but I'm not going to. Mr. Martin says you're okay. Says you knocked over a tough case in Reno last year. He thinks you're on the up-and-up in this Burke business, and right now I'm going to say you are. I won't say as much for Morgan and Burke. I'm throwing them in the can tonight." Humphrey started to speak, but Anders stopped him with a gesture. "Sure, I know about the phone-call. One of my deputies talked to Mrs. Owens too. You know that. Burke has an alibi, but Morgan hasn't. He could have pulled this job."

"You overestimate his agility," Humphrey said. "He's too fat to climb in at windows."

"The jail diet will do him good." Anders gathered the cards in a pile, straightened the pile. "You nosed around in there"—he motioned with his head toward Stephen's room—"before I came. Find anything?"

"Just what you found."

ANDERS pulled his eyebrows down. "You didn't see a legal document, by any chance?"

"What sort of document?"

"A will," Anders said dryly. "The new one Mr. Dunecht had his son draw up. Harry brought it home yesterday afternoon for him to sign. It's gone."

Humphrey examined the ceiling. It was redwood, and very fine. He said: "Now I understand why you're confused. Why you don't think so much of us as suspects."

"I think enough of you," Anders said. "Did you see the will?"

"No. And I didn't take it."

"Someone did. That will being gone makes it look bad for certain people."

"Perhaps it was put away. Perhaps there's a safe in his room."

Anders blinked at him. "You did look around."

"Some," said Humphrey. "Who are the folks it looks bad for?"

"If you took it, you know who."

"Let it go at that," Humphrey said. "Jay Martin will tell me."

Anders stuck out his lower lip, tasted his mustache. "The will split the estate four ways: Harry, Ella, Martin and Katherine Mesdrell each got a quarter."

"Was it signed?"

"That's the question," Anders replied. "No one seems to know."

"How about the old will? You said this was a new one. There must be an old one."

"I was getting around to that when you came in. I was talking to Harry about it."

Humphrey found a plaintive look, used it. "You intimate I took the will to make it tough for someone. Will you be reasonable? If I did that, I'd have to know how the new one differed from the old one, wouldn't I? How the devil would I know?"

Anders shrugged.

"Suppose we find out how the old one reads."

Anders hesitated. He seemed to be adding up all he knew and all he suspected about Humphrey. It must have added up right, because he went to the library door and asked: "Would you step here a minute, Mr. Dunecht?"

HARRY stepped. He cast a very cold look toward Humphrey. He said: "Well, Mr. Anders?"

"We need a little more information, Mr. Dunecht."

"We?" Harry's eyes sprayed contempt at the round-faced young man.

"I'm not included," Humphrey assured him. "He's got me on the pan. He thinks I'm trying to protect somebody by pinning suspicion on one of you."

Harry's face said he liked the idea. His lips said: "All right, Mr. Anders. What is it?"

Anders cleared his throat. "The old will: what did it say?"

Harry looked at Humphrey, and then he looked at Anders. "Get him out of here," he told Anders.

Humphrey rose. "I'll go ask Martin."

"Go ask him," Harry said.

"I'm going." He got as far as the library door, looked into the living-room. Jay was on the davenport beside Katherine. The Carpenters were standing together by the front windows. Oscar lay back in one of the armchairs, his mouth open a little, his eyes closed. Burke was over in the corner, and there was a deputy sheriff not far away. "Mr. Martin," Humphrey said, "would you mind coming in here?"

Martin didn't mind. He got up, came across the room, stood facing his step-brother and the Sheriff.

"These boys have me on the freckle," Humphrey said. "They think I snuck

out with a brand-new last will and testament, so that folks would give the family the eye. Your brother—"

"He isn't my brother," Jay said.

"Your step-brother doesn't want me to know what was in the old will. How about it?"

"Tell him," Jay said. "Or shall I?"

Harry took a deep breath, shoved it through his teeth. "You're a fool."

Jay's hand shot out, caught Harry's coat-collar.

"Please," Anders pleaded.

Jay dropped his hand. "One of these days I'm going to bat your ears off." His voice sounded as though it had been filed. "Tell him."

Harry straightened his collar, shrugged. "All right. Under the previous will, Mr. Martin, my sister and myself were the sole heirs, save for one ten-thousand-dollar bequest."

"That went to Ch'en," Jay said.

Anders hit his palm with his fist. "The Chink?"

"Ch'en Tu," Jay said.

"Why didn't you tell me that before? Don't you see?" Hope brightened the Sheriff's eyes. "The Chink found the body, didn't he? That new will cut him off without a dime. Well?" His tone had the Chinese on the gallows.

"It isn't as simple as that," Jay said.

"Call Ch'en and ask him about it."

"That's what I'm going to do." Anders flung the words over his shoulder as he hurried to the door and bellowed for a deputy named Gene; and when Gene appeared, he was dispatched to find the Chinese.

Anders walked over to the fireplace, and stood before it, looking jubilant. Jay said mildly: "You're in for a disappointment, Sheriff."

"Maybe," Anders said, but his face didn't say maybe. He seemed to be holding his breath. He kept his eyes on the door, and when the thin form of Ch'en Tu came through it, hurled an order at him. "Sit down."

CH'EN TU, perched on the chair-edge, looked like a dummy out of the window of some Oriental art-store, an impassive dummy in a black silk kimono.

"So you held out on me!" Anders snapped.

"I retained nothing," Ch'en Tu said.

"You didn't know Mr. Dunecht made a new will? I suppose you didn't know that."

"Oh, yes."

"You did, huh?"

"Oh, yes. Mr. Dunecht and I discussed the matter at some length, Mr. Anders."

"You knew he was going to cut you out of that ten thousand bucks."

"At my request, Mr. Anders." He lifted his dark eyes, stared at Harry. "Mr. Harry knows all about it."

"I know all about it too," Jay said. "Stephen told me."

"NOW, look here," Anders said. "You expect me to believe this Chinaman didn't want ten thousand bucks?"

"I expect you to believe nothing, Mr. Anders." Ch'en regarded his thin yellow hands. "It happens to be the case. At my request, Mr. Dunecht eliminated the ten thousand dollars, and gave me instead the thing I desired."

"What?"

"A set of chess-men." He looked toward the inlaid table. "Some of the pieces were on that table a short time ago."

"I moved 'em," Anders said. "I put 'em in a drawer. So you turned down ten thousand bucks for some chess-men." He was full of disbelief. Ch'en bowed. "Don't give me that," Anders said.

"You'll have to take it," Jay put in. "Stephen told me the whole business."

Anders moved to the table, opened a little drawer, took out a bishop and examined it. "These things worth much?"

"To me, a great deal," Ch'en said. "Mr. Dunecht had them all his life."

"You'd rather have them than dough?"

"I have enough money, Mr. Anders."

"You're lying," Anders said.

"Lay off," Jay said. "He isn't lying. He wanted the chess-men, so Stephen gave them to him. Stephen told me if anything happened to him, Ch'en got them. I think he told Harry the same thing. Did he?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"You take that will?" Anders persisted.

"I took nothing," Ch'en said.

"Ch'en didn't kill Stephen, if that's what you're getting at," Jay said. "He's been with Stephen all his life. Damn it, he had no reason to kill him. So lay off him."

"Mr. Martin," said Anders, "I'm not charging Ch'en Tu with murder—not yet. He's a possibility, I admit. But not the only one. This is the way the case stacks up. Either Mr. Dunecht was killed by someone who didn't want him to sign that will, or by someone who

wanted him out of the way because he possessed certain damaging information." He shot a glance at Humphrey.

"You're presupposing the will wasn't signed," Humphrey said. "Suppose it was."

"What difference does that make?" Anders said. "Signed or unsigned, it's gone. That narrows the field, gentlemen. It narrows the field way down. It looks to me like we've two suspects." His thumb hooked under his badge, wiggled it. "The—ah—Chinaman or one of Burke's agents."

"Which one?" Humphrey asked.

"Morgan or Larry Pelham," Anders said.

Harry looked almost happy. "I think that sums it up."

"It isn't as simple as that." Jay was scowling. "There are others who didn't want that new will signed. And by God, Harry, you're one of them. How about Ella and that husband of hers? How about me? We stand to get a third instead of a fourth—under the old will. We've a hell of a lot more to gain than Ch'en has. But we're not servants. Hell, no. We're men of property. So the law looks the other way. I won't have it. It isn't between the Burke crowd and Ch'en. We're all involved."

"Don't be so damned noble." Harry poured contempt over every word.

"Noble, hell," Jay said. "I know I didn't kill Stephen. He was the only one of this family worth a damn. But I could have. And so could you, and so could Ella."

"You hysterical fool!" Harry said. "You know where I was."

"I know where you said you were. I know what you said you did. But why should they believe you or me or Ella, any more than Ch'en here?"

Anders held up his hand. He said sententiously: "Because Mr. Dunecht was your father, Mr. Martin. I've known you folks for fifteen—twenty years. Not you so well as young Mr. Dunecht or Mrs. Carpenter. That's why I take your word, see. If Mr. Dunecht says he was in his room, then I'm going to believe him until I find out different. The same goes with you and Mrs. Carpenter."

"That's white of you," Jay said.

HIS tone seemed to hurt Anders' feelings. "I don't see why you're so all-fired anxious to mix the family up in this, Mr. Martin."

"Because he loves us," Harry said.

"Oh, Lord!" Jay said, and started for the door. But he didn't get through it. A mouse of a man with only a suggestion of a chin pushed past him and stood blinking at Anders.

"Well," Anders snapped. "Whose were they?"

"The ones on the phone were Mr. Dunecht's," the mousey man said. "Mr. Stephen Dunecht's."

"And the safe?"

"Miss Mesdrell's," the mouse replied. "Her fingerprints are all over it."

IF ever a girl looked scared, Katherine Mesdrell did. She walked into the library as though every step were agony, and dropped into the nearest chair. Her eyes seemed bigger than ever, and she had difficulty getting enough air into her lungs.

Humphrey wondered if she would appreciate his pity. He wanted very much to walk over and put his hand protectingly on her shoulder, because she had a very fine shoulder. From the look in Jay Martin's eyes, he had the same idea. It was Harry, however, who set himself up as her champion. He moved to her chair, spoke softly to her, and then he wasn't the eminent young barrister. Humphrey thought of that parting remark of Ella's—"You lovesick fool!" He certainly looked lovesick.

"I'm sure you can explain it," Harry said.

She looked up at him, tried to smile. "What?"

Anders remembered he was the Sheriff. He said: "I'll do the talking."

Harry shot a dirty look at him, but he held his ground. "Please, Mr. Dunecht."

"Go ahead." Harry's tone dared the Sheriff to get rough.

Anders took a deep breath: "Miss Mesdrell—as Mr. Dunecht says, you can probably explain this. I certainly hope so."

Katherine didn't say anything. From the look on her face, she couldn't.

"This is Mr. Williams." Anders pointed at the chinless mouse. "He's our fingerprint expert. Mr. Williams found some fingerprints on the wall-safe in Mr. Dunecht's bedroom. They are your fingerprints."

Still she didn't speak. She sat there staring at the Sheriff, and holding onto the arms of the chair, digging her fingers into the leather.

"Did you open the safe last night, Miss Mesdrell?"

She found her voice: "No. No, I didn't."

"When did you touch the safe last?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

"You know the combination of the safe, Miss Mesdrell?"

She nodded, tried to say something, but the words weren't there.

"Now surely you can remember when you touched the safe last." Anders put a little edge on his voice.

"Maybe it was yesterday morning. Yes—that's when it was."

"You opened the safe?"

"Yes. I opened it. Stephen—Mr. Dunecht—asked me to."

"Why?"

"He—wanted to show me something."

"Show you what?"

"A brooch. His mother's."

"It's still in there," Harry said. "You saw it, Mr. Anders."

"I saw it," Anders said. "You're sure that's the reason you opened the safe?"

"What other reason could there be?" Harry spat the question at him. "She's explained satisfactorily. Why should you doubt her?"

"For God's sake!" Jay said. "I misjudged you. You do think of others sometimes."

"Keep out of this." Harry's voice was a warning.

"Suppose you let the Sheriff finish his job," Jay snapped, and the look Katherine gave him should have made him wince. Some of her fear went away, and there was anger in its place.

Jay's support gave Anders courage. He said doggedly: "Miss Mesdrell, I don't like to be persistent but I'm not satisfied that you're telling the truth. Not only about the safe. You said you went out walking around eleven o'clock, and stayed up on the hill for a long time. Are you sure that's where you were?"

Her voice was faint. "Yes, that's where I was. Up on the hill."

HARRY broke in: "What are you driving at, Anders? Why should Miss Mesdrell lie? What would she gain by it? You said my father was killed either by Burke's crowd or by someone who would profit if that new will wasn't signed. Miss Mesdrell stood to receive a fortune under that will. Are you intimating that she killed my father?"

"I'm not intimating anything," Anders said. "I'm just trying to get to the bottom of this. I'm not quite satisfied with her story."

"It's true." Her voice had desperation in it.

"You touched that safe yesterday morning. That's the last time?"

"Yes."

"You stayed with Mr. Dunecht until eleven o'clock, and then you went for a walk?"

"Yes."

"You walked up the hill back of the house and stayed up there until after twelve?"

"Yes."

"Then you went to your room?"

"I went to my room," Katherine said. "On the stairs I met Mr. Martin and spoke to him."

"Satisfied?" Harry said.

The Sheriff said he was, but he didn't look it. The girl got up, stood there as though uncertain what to do; and watching her, Humphrey saw that she kept looking at Jay Martin, oddly, questioningly. It was as though she wanted him to believe her, as though she cared only that he have faith in her.

"You better go to bed." Harry's voice was soft.

She tried to smile, and then her glance moved to the door into the bedroom, and tears came into her eyes. She turned suddenly and hurried out of the library and across the living-room, and ran upstairs.

ANDERS combed his mustache with his forefinger, looked uncomfortable. "Sorry to upset her," he said.

The deputy called Gene stuck his head in the door.

"They got some of them Okies rounded up," Gene said. "Want to know if you are gonna talk to 'em."

Anders nodded. "Yeah. I'll go. Nothing more I can do here tonight." He looked at Ch'en Tu speculatively.

"He won't run away," Jay said, interpreting the look. "I'll vouch for him."

In the living-room, Oscar was sitting up, trying to stay awake. Burke was reading a magazine. The others had gone. The Sheriff stopped in the middle of the room, sucked at a tooth. "Come along, you two," he said.

"What for?" Burke sounded ugly.

"Just because," Anders said.

Oscar sat up. "My dear fellow—"

"Come along," Anders snapped.

"Is this an arrest?" Oscar tried to be indignant.

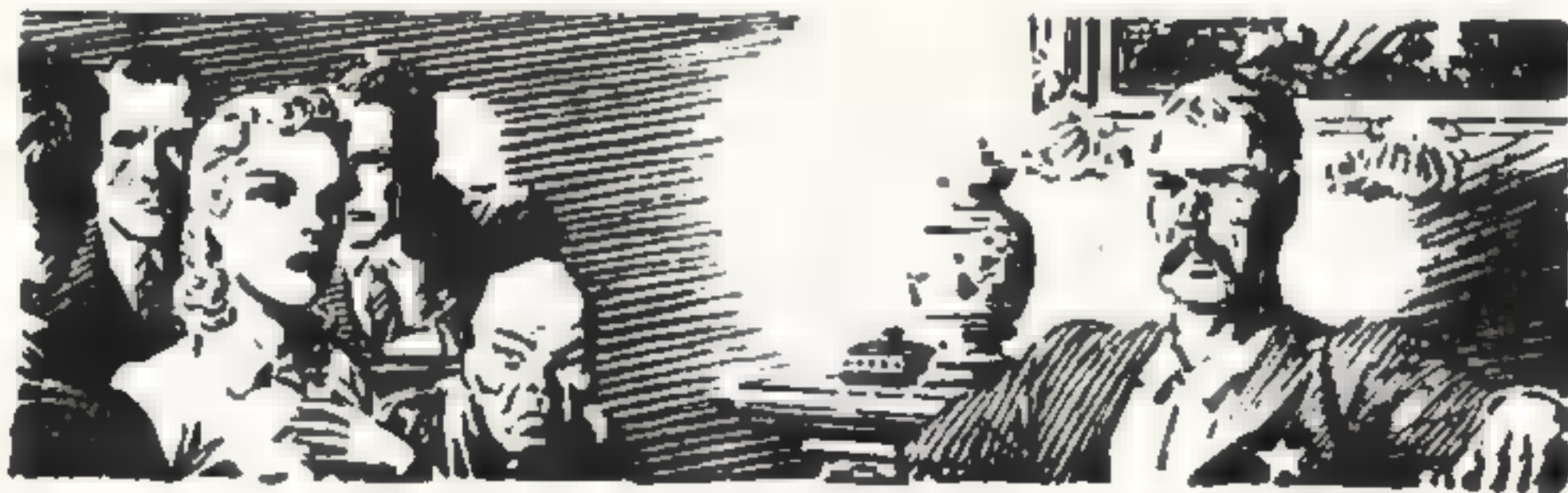
"Sort of," Anders said.

"And the charge, my dear fellow?"

"No charge. Just suspicion."

"Suspicion of what?" Oscar assumed a citizen-and-taxpayer pose.

"Take your pick," Anders said—and led the way to the door.



CHAPTER VII

SOMEONE was banging on the door. "It's eight o'clock, Mr. Campbell. You want a paper?"

"Stick it under the door," Humphrey said.

There was a rustle of news-print, then the sound of footsteps going away. He slid out of bed, got the paper and spread it out on the rumpled blankets. There were two banners smeared across the top of the front page. One read, "STEPHEN DUNECHT MURDERED." The other, "DEPUTY NEAR DEATH IN OKIE RIOT."

The riot at Tumbleweed was crammed into one column. That was understandable. The migratory workers had been rioting a good deal of late; the deputy was still alive, and the two gentlemen allegedly responsible for his critical condition, a couple of organizers named Max Steiner and Jim Norse, were still at large. But the murder took up most of the paper.

You couldn't blame the staff of the *News* for turning editorial handsprings over the Dunecht case. The county's wealthiest and most influential citizen had been murdered in a brutal and mysterious fashion—strangled with a lariat, and stabbed with a saddle-maker's awl. Two men were in jail as material witnesses. The ghost of an old scandal had arisen from the depths of an abandoned gravel-pit to haunt the fabulous Sycamores. One of the central figures of that scandal—the foreman Larry Pelham—was being sought far and wide for murder. And a will was missing. You couldn't ask for more than that.

For some time, Humphrey read the paper, gleaning from it the information he lacked concerning the statements of the principals, made to the Sheriff. Then he dressed and went downstairs. Owens, the hotel-keeper, was shoving a mop around the lobby, and the task seemed to irk him. When he saw Humphrey, he leaned the mop against a chair and gave him a cheerful good morning.

"There's a piece about you in the paper," Owens said. "I see you aint a cop after all."

"Don't you like cops?"

"No," said Owens. He moved closer and whispered: "Not since they pushed me around, them dry years." He looked furtively around, then added: "Used to bring it up the river."

"Those were the days," Humphrey said.

"You bet," Owens said. "You bet they were. Why'd they lock Mr. Burke up?"

"They had to lock up somebody," Humphrey said. "You know how cops are."

"But he was in his room," Owens argued. "Didn't they believe my wife?"

"Maybe not." Humphrey started edging toward the dining-room.

"They's someone can back her up besides me," Owens said.

Humphrey stood still. "Who?"

"Mr. Winters," Owens asserted. "He come in about a half-hour before that call. Said he heard the rumpus in the hall. Said it woke him up. Wait a minute. I'll bring him down." He went up the stairs two at a time; in a few minutes he came down again, and Winters was behind him.

"GOOD morning," Winters said cheerfully. "Nice morning. Starting to get hot. Mr. Owens says maybe I can help you fellows."

Humphrey nodded. "Maybe. How well do you know the Sheriff?"

"Pretty well," said Winters. He thrust his beard toward Humphrey, winked and added in a low tone: "I let the boys use my place for picnics."

"He trust you, then?"

"Sure," Winters said. "Mr. Owens says they got Mr. Burke locked up. That's too bad. They shouldn't have locked him up. He was in his room, because I heard him."

"See him?"

"No. But I heard him. Door of my room's right by the phone. I was just getting to sleep when Mrs. Owens came upstairs and banged on his door. Pretty soon he came to the phone, and I heard him talking into it."

"Remember what he said?"

"Let's see," said Winters, and nested his beard in the palm of his hand. "Well, I remember him saying 'Yes, Mr. Dun-echt.' Then he said something about not believing him. And something about staying here. That's about all."

"Sure it was Burke?"

Winters shrugged. "Sounded like him talking. I know his voice pretty well. He's been around the hotel quite a bit, you know."

"How about calling Anders and telling him this?" Humphrey suggested.

Winters beamed. "I'll do it. Glad to oblige. I'll go call him right now." And with that he went upstairs.

HUMPHREY thanked Owens, went into the dining-room and found a table by the window. Five men and women were at the other tables, and they examined him with a good deal of interest. Shoes squeaked toward him. A blonde Amazon shoved a menu at him. He said: "Orange-juice, if it's fresh—grapefruit, if it isn't. Toast and milk and two two-minute eggs."

The Amazon grunted and went away. Across the vacant lot there was a blacksmith shop, and Humphrey could see the blacksmith putting shoes on an ancient horse. Presently the Amazon brought his eggs, put them in front of him and he gave her a couple of appraising glances. He decided that a man would have a hard time taking advantage of her.

"Raw," said the Amazon, "just plain raw."

Presently a man stuck his head in the dining-room, looked around, crossed to Humphrey's table and pulled out a chair. The Amazon swooped down on him immediately. That was because he looked like Errol Flynn. His name was James Patridge, and he was the best-looking private detective in the business.

"Strawberry waffle," Patridge said.

"About time," Humphrey said.

"What's about time?" The Amazon looked baffled.

Humphrey spoke to the waitress. "Get him his waffle, babe." She squeaked away.

"You boys seem to be in a mess." Patridge chewed slowly on a lump of sugar. "Which one of you knocked the old man off?"

"I thought you were a detective," Humphrey said.

"The mailman didn't bring me the murder part of the course. Where did you get the skeleton?"

"In the gravel-pit."

"I know. But before you put it in the pit."

"You're too damned smart," Humphrey said.

"I know Morgan and Company," Patridge said. "What's the set-up?"

"It's all in the paper."

"I only read the headlines," Patridge said. "Burke kill the old bird?"

Humphrey shrugged. "Somebody sure killed him! Around midnight, the coroner figures. Lassoed him and then stuck a saddler's awl in him. The rope and the awl belong to the Dunechts. That's what the paper says."

"I'll take Burke," Patridge said.

"He seems to have been upstairs."

"Who else could have killed him?"

"A lot of people: Harry Dunecht. His sister. Her husband. The Mesdrell dame. The Chinaman."

"Were they around at the time?"

"All but Mesdrell say they were in bed. She was roaming around outside."

"Who saw him alive last?"

"The murderer," Humphrey said.

PATRIDGE assumed a pained expression. "Don't be elementary."

"The Chinaman admits he did. Put him to bed. Ella Dunecht says she saw him around ten-thirty, just before she went to bed. Harry says he knocked on the old man's door around eleven-thirty and talked to him through the door."

"How about this Martin guy?"

"We can leave him out of it. I don't think he had anything to do with it."

"Don't be too trusting," Patridge advised. "Any fingerprints around there?"

"Lots of them," Humphrey answered.

"The Mesdrell girl's—the Chinaman's—Ella's. But mostly Stephen Dunecht's. The phone had his all over it."

"Think Pelham is alive?"

"Anders thinks so," Humphrey said.

"He's combing the land for him."

"If he finds him, God help you guys," Patridge said. "You'll be accessories or something."

"He has him already."

Patridge elevated his eyebrows. "The skeleton is Mr. Pelham," Humphrey added. "I'll take bets on that. Want to bet?"

"No," said Patridge. "Want to hear about Mr. Burke?" Humphrey said he did. "You're not going to hear much," Patridge went on, "because we haven't had time to find out much. He's been living around the Mother Lode country. Most of last year he was a strike-breaker in the Grass Valley mine trouble."

"That's where he gets his gun-packing complex," Humphrey said. "Has he a police record?"

"Couldn't find any. Buddy of the cops up Grass Valley way, looks like."

"Keep on him," Humphrey said.

"Will do." Patridge turned his attention to the Amazon. She shoved a plate with a waffle on it in front of him. There was a mess of strawberry jam on the waffle's brown checkered surface.

"That look all right?" she asked.

"Beautiful," Patridge said. He wasn't looking at the waffle. "What time you get off tonight?"

"Eight-thirty." She looked hopeful.

"Want to go somewhere?"

"Sure," Patridge said.

"We could go to the box social."

"What's that?"

"At the Pavilion. The girls make up box lunches and the men bid for 'em. Mine's gonna have a blue ribbon on it."

"That should be fun," Patridge said.

The Amazon blushed.

"Don't let me interfere with your love-life," Humphrey put in.

"I won't," Patridge said. "Eight-thirty, princess."

"Run along, princess," Humphrey said. "You're keeping his mind off his work." The Amazon took her coy expression into the kitchen.

Patridge, submerging himself in the waffle, asked between mouthfuls: "What's my program?"

"We should identify the skeleton," Humphrey replied. "That's important. You take Chanford. I'll take Joaquin. If there's a saddle-shop here, check it. Try the store too. It's been here a long time. Maybe they have an old account-book with Pelham's name in it. There's a picture of the belt-buckle in the paper. Take that along with you." Humphrey got up, put a dollar on the checked tablecloth, grinned at Patridge and went out. Two ambitious-looking youths were loitering in the lobby, and at a sign from Mrs. Owens, draped over the desk like a dishrag, they bore down on him. He was sure they were reporters, and he was right. For ten minutes he sparred with them, took them down the street to the bar, bought them drinks, and said he had to wash his hands. The rest-room window let him into an alley; he cut down this to where his car was parked, got in and headed for the Sycamores.

DEATH seemed remote as he opened the big gate. Upon the flowering hills the white-faced cattle drowsed, and in the pasture-land along the river the fat sheep were grazing. A mockingbird

scolded him as he climbed the steps; from the wicker settee on the porch, a tortoiseshell cat regarded him sleepily.

CH'EN TU opened the great door, led him into the living-room. There was sunlight streaming through the windows, and the Senator looked almost pleasant. Jay Martin didn't. He came out of the library, disheveled as usual, and not a little grim. There were lines in his face that hadn't been there before. He said: "Hello, Campbell." His tone said he had little use for life today.

"Where's Harry?" Humphrey asked. "Joaquin."

"That's swell," Humphrey said. "Maybe we can get somewhere."

"With whom?"

"Katherine." Humphrey straddled a chair, leaned on the back.

Jay pulled his shaggy eyebrows together. "Why?"

"She's lying."

Jay bristled, eyed Humphrey darkly, said: "Now, look here—"

"Last night it was Harry," Humphrey said. "Are you going to start making it tough too?"

"I'm not trying to make it tough." Jay studied the carpet, stuck his hands in his pockets. "What makes you think she's lying?"

"Don't you?"

Jay hesitated. He said, half-heartedly: "Why would she lie?"

"Let's ask her."

You could see he didn't like the idea. He scowled, started for the door, stopped, looked at Humphrey, finally went out.

Pretty soon Jay came back with the girl. If she had slept at all, she didn't look it. The only bright thing about her was her hair, tumbling back from her white forehead in a mass of red-gold.

"Mr. Campbell wants to ask some questions."

"Is that necessary?" she asked wearily.

"We've got to clear this up," Jay said. "He thinks you can help." He was still very tender.

"I went over the whole thing last night."

"Mr. Campbell thinks you're—" Jay cut the sentence off.

"I don't think," Humphrey said. "I know."

"You know what?" She got the question out in a hurry, looked at him, looked away again.

"That you didn't tell the truth," Humphrey said.

She turned a frightened face to Jay. "What right has he to say that?"

Jay flushed. He said: "He's trying to clear this up, Miss Mesdrell."

"You know I told the truth?" Her lovely voice begged Jay to believe her.

He went to the mantel, leaned on it with his back to her, and if ever a man looked uncomfortable, he did.

"Don't you know?"

"It doesn't matter what he knows," Humphrey said. "You didn't walk up the hill last night, Miss Mesdrell. You went down to the bridge. Why?"

"I didn't." Her voice had desperation in it.

"I saw you," Humphrey said. "I thought I saw someone with you. Who was it?"

"No one. I was alone. I walked up the hill alone."

Jay turned. There was no softness in his voice. "Were you at the bridge?" She didn't answer. "Whom did you meet at the bridge, Miss Mesdrell?"

"No one. I didn't go to the bridge."

"Mr. Campbell says he saw you there." Jay faced her.

She straightened her shoulders, and life came back into her face. "Why should you believe Mr. Campbell?"

Humphrey didn't give him a chance to answer. He said: "Miss Mesdrell, he needn't believe me. I know I wasn't mistaken. That you were at the bridge may have nothing to do with this. I hope it hasn't. But it's a point that must be cleared up."

"Do you think I killed Stephen?" She choked the question out.

"I know you didn't," Humphrey said.

"Then go away." Tears crossed her cheeks and she brushed them off with the back of her hand.

"But the man you were with might have," Humphrey said.

Jay's face was hard and old and tired. He spoke sharply. "Tell the truth, Miss Mesdrell."

SHE was breathing quickly, as though there wasn't enough air in the room. "Mr. Martin, I loved your father. I didn't kill him. I had nothing to do with his death. And I want no part of all this,"—her sweeping gesture took in the Sycamores,—"even if I'm entitled to it."

"I haven't told the Sheriff about it yet," Humphrey said mildly.

"Tell him, then." She flung the words at him, then hurried away. . . .

The hall outside Anders' office was crowded with lean, dejected men and women, in overalls and faded gingham wrappers. A man with a star on his shirt barred Humphrey's way. "Where you going?" the man asked.

"I have a rendezvous with Señor Anders," Humphrey said. "What's this? A convention?"

"Fruit-tramps," the man said disgustedly. "Okies."

"Fine work," Humphrey said, and made his way along the hall, followed by the curious stares of its occupants. There were half a dozen deputies in the outer office, all of them heavily armed, and on the desks there were rifles and a couple of tear-gas guns. A wall-eyed little man told him to sit down. Presently the clerk crooked a finger at him, and he went through a gate and past a heavy door. Anders sat with his back to the window. Burke was leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets and he gave Humphrey an ironic smile. Oscar was being silently indignant.

"WE'VE decided to release your friends," Anders said.

"Sweet of you," said Humphrey.

"I want you guys to stick around for a while." Anders got a cigar out of a box in the top drawer, bit the end off it and struck a match on his pants-leg.

Burke laughed without humor. "Tell him your other suggestion, Sheriff."

"Let me guess," Humphrey said. "He wants us to fade out of the Dunecht picture. I'll bet Harry's been talking to you, Sheriff."

Anders looked uncomfortable. He grumbled: "It might be a good idea."

"Reprehensible," Oscar said. "That's what it is. The forces of law and order being used to deprive citizens of their rights."

"Take a look out in the hall," Humphrey suggested, "if you think you're getting pushed around."

"I suggest you spend a night in the county jail," Oscar said. "It's an experience, my boy. I've never—" He caught Humphrey's eye, and left the sentence unfinished.

"I hope it won't be necessary to put you through that experience again." Anders spoke to the ceiling. "Perhaps—" He surrounded himself with a cloud of smoke, let them guess the rest.

"Is that a threat, Sheriff?"

"A hint," Anders said.

"Suppose we don't take it?"



Anders shrugged and fumbled with some papers. "You can go."

"You're going to be disappointed—we won't lead the guys you put on our tails to Larry Pelham."

"Who said I was going to put anyone on your tail?"

"Aren't you?"

"Go on," Anders growled. "Beat it."

Humphrey smiled. "I'm going to do something for you, Sheriff. I'm going to prove Larry Pelham's in the morgue."

"You can't prove it."

"I think I can. And I need your help."

"I'm too busy." He waved at the door.

"You won't have to do any work. I'll do the work. But I need that belt-buckle, and I need a chart of the skeleton's bridgework. If the skeleton isn't Larry, we'll give the papers a statement we were mistaken, and we'll make ourselves scarce. Anything we turn up, we'll hand over to you, and you can take credit for it. How about it?" He saw that Anders was hesitating, and added: "You think Pelham is alive, and you're using a lot of effort trying to find him. If the skeleton is Larry, you're wasting a lot of time and energy."

Anders nodded thoughtfully, opened the middle drawer of the desk and brought out a manila envelope, took from it the buckle and a sheet of paper. The paper was a dental chart. He said: "Go to it. And don't bother me any more. I'm up to my neck in work."

Humphrey put the buckle and the chart in his pocket, grinned and led the way out. Oscar went along the corridor grumbling to himself; when he passed the deputy guarding the street door, he glared at him. "Gestapol!" he said.

IT was free market day, and along the Fulton Street side of the park stalls were set up, and people were selling flowers and vegetables and poultry. Between the stalls, pitch-men were discoursing on the merits of knife-sharpeners, cleaning fluids and Indian herb tonics. One of them, standing beside an anatomical chart, waved at Oscar. The fat man didn't return the greeting, but walked rapidly away.

"He know you?" Burke asked.

"Of course not." Oscar was indignant. Humphrey, who knew Oscar's past, said under his breath: "You old liar."

WHEN they reached Joaquin Street, Humphrey turned left and they went north past pawnshops and second-hand stores and Greek restaurants. Oscar spotted a bar, looked at it longingly.

"All right," Humphrey said. "But don't get too drunk."

"Just a couple of beers," Oscar said, and went through the swinging doors.

"What you hunting for?" Burke asked.

"Saddle-shops," Humphrey answered. "There are some old ones along here, somewhere." He fished a paper out of his pocket, glanced at it, glanced at the number over the door of the saloon, and walked north again. The buildings grew older, more disreputable. Now the stores displayed cheap boots, overalls and hickory shirts. One had saddles behind the dirty pane. They went in. An old man was sewing a ring on a leather strap. He took the buckle, rubbed it with a cloth, stuck a jeweler's glass in his left eye, studied the worn bit of silver.

"Not mine," the old man said. "See that mark?" He held out the buckle, pointed to a tiny indentation. "Arrowhead. I'd say Alvarez made it."

"Where will I find him?" Humphrey sounded casual. He wasn't.

"Damned if I know," the old man said. "He's been dead twenty years. You'll find his son across the street in the next block."

Humphrey thanked him, went out of the store. Burke said: "We're getting warm, anyway."

Humphrey nodded, crossed the street, went farther north. An almost indecipherable sign clamped on the front of an ancient structure said: "*Saddles, boots, silver work. J. Alvarez, Prop.*" A shabby little figure of a horse topped the sign. He pushed the door open. The smell of oil and leather and dust surrounded them. In the corner a little Mexican was putting some pretty fancy-work on a piece of leather. He put his knife down, studied the buckle, found the arrowhead. He said: "Yes, my father made it."

Humphrey rubbed his hand on the smooth pommel of a saddle. "You wouldn't know who he made it for?"

"I wouldn't know," Alvarez said. "That was made a long time ago."

Humphrey took a badge out of his coat pocket, let Alvarez glimpse it. Then

took a ten-dollar bill out and put it on the table in front of the Mexican. "You keep books? Records?"

Alvarez shrugged. "Maybe."

"This was made some time in the nineties—around 1893. Your books go back that far?"

"Maybe." Alvarez got up, went through a door at the back. After a while he came out with a couple of dusty ledgers, put them on the table, picked up his knife. Humphrey took one book, handed the other to Burke.

The shop was silent save for the soft rustle of old paper, and the scraping of the knife against the soft leather. Humphrey examined page after page, and he was halfway through the book when Burke looked up. "Here it is, Campbell." Humphrey looked over his shoulder, saw a name:

"*Pelham, Larry.*" And under the name was a list, and after each item was a date. On August 2, 1892, Larry had bought a saddle for \$25. On January 12, 1893, a pair of chaps for \$6.50. On April 9, a bridle for \$7 and on July 1, another bridle for \$11.50. It was on September 5, he purchased a belt and buckle for \$4.25.

Humphrey closed the book. "We'll take this along," he said.

Again Alvarez shrugged. "Okay. Bring her back."

Outside, Burke said: "So my claims were preposterous." He smiled, and his smile wasn't pleasant. "I wonder what they'll say to this. I wish"—he took off his hat and rumped his hair—"that Mr. Dunecht was alive, so I could call him a liar."

"So do I," Humphrey said. He glanced at Burke, and suddenly a violent dislike for the young man came over him. A cold-blooded devil, he thought.

IT was a fine night with the moon spinning high over the mountains, and only enough wind to bring one the warm smell of wood-smoke. Humphrey drove slowly, looking at the moon-drenched fields, seeing the friendly lights in the farmhouse windows, and he began to feel better. There was something depressing about dentists' offices, newspaper morgues and public libraries.

A row of red lanterns barred his way six miles out of town. A big fellow cradling a shotgun in the crook of his right arm put his foot on the running-board.

"Come on, get out," he said.

Humphrey obeyed. The big fellow pointed a flashlight at him, flicked it on. Another man stepped forward and his hands began patting Humphrey.

"While you're about it, scratch my back," Humphrey said.

"Shut up," the man said. His hand stopped under Humphrey's left arm. "He's got a gun."

"Get it," the big fellow said.

The other man got it. He pointed it at Humphrey. "Don't do that," Humphrey said. "I'm nervous."

"What's your name?" the big fellow asked.

Humphrey told him. "In my hip pocket, you'll find a wallet packed with credentials. It also holds a gun-permit. Now, what in hell is this?"

The other man fished out the wallet. The big fellow studied its contents. Pretty soon he handed it back, and the other man handed the gun back.

"Sorry." The big fellow was courteous now. "We're looking for a couple of guys who beat up a deputy sheriff."

"Do I look like a couple of guys?" Humphrey got back in the car. "By God, I resent that."

The big fellow laughed. "You're a card. You sure are."

"This is all very silly," Humphrey said. "If I beat up a deputy sheriff, I wouldn't hang around. I've seen what happens to guys who beat up cops."

"I said we were sorry." The big fellow was getting annoyed. Humphrey decided it was a good idea to forget the matter. He started the car, smiled at them, and drove on.

It was seven-thirty when he parked in front of the hotel. Mrs. Owens stopped him in the lobby.

"Mr. Patridge left this note for you." She held out a folded piece of paper.

Humphrey took it. "Did Mr. Martin call?" She shook her head, and went back to her post behind the desk.

Patridge's note was brief:

Come down to the Pavilion. Waited until 7:15 for you. Then the blonde blizzard got impatient. No luck on the skeleton. No luck on Burke. If you haven't eaten, why not partake of some of the toothsome viands prepared by the local wenches? From what I hear, you meet some nice people at these box socials.

—J. P.

When Humphrey came downstairs half an hour later and looked into the dining-room, he decided to take Pat-

ridge's advice. "I'll be at the Pavilion if anyone calls," he told Mrs. Owens, and went out.

Passing Bill's place, he saw Oscar through the window and went in. The fat man was in the middle of a tall drink that was mostly whisky. Burke was trying to beat the marble game.

"Young man," Oscar said, "where have you been?"

"How many?" Humphrey indicated the glass.

"Two or three," Oscar said. "And some short beers."

"I'm going to a box social," Humphrey said. "You want to come along?"

Oscar emptied the glass, got carefully off the stool. He was able to stand without help. Burke left the machine. "Mind if I go along?" Burke asked.

THEY went out into the moonlight and along the quiet street, and not far off they could hear the river moving slowly past, rustling the reeds.

"When I collect what's coming to me, I'm going to leave this place," Burke said. "It drives me nuts."

"I like it," Humphrey said, and looked at the sky. The stars seemed just out of reach.

The pavement ended, and they went along a dirt road winding through the cottonwoods. The moonlight found its way through the trees and put strange silver patterns on the earth. Ahead, a band struck up. It wasn't a very good band but Humphrey didn't mind, because one of the musicians was an accordionist. Around a turn they saw a low building squatting on the river-bank, and the building blazed with lights. A big sign said it was the Chanford Pavilion. They went up the steps, and a dark-haired girl at the wicket held out her hand. She had a fine smile.

"Two bits apiece." The girl eyed Humphrey appraisingly and then she turned her attention to Burke. You could tell that Burke impressed her. Women, thought Humphrey, were odd. A lot of them liked wrong guys.

Winters hurried toward them, beaming, shoved his hand out, and Humphrey took it. He had the pump-handle technique down pat. "Good evening, good evening," Winters said, "You're just in time for the social."

"I owe you a drink," Burke said. "For getting me out of the can."

"Glad to do it, Mr. Burke." Winters wagged his beard at Humphrey. "It was

your friend's suggestion." He put on an expression of mock annoyance. "Don't keep me awake all night again; that's all I ask. I like my sleep. Got to have it." He led them into the big low-ceilinged room draped with colored paper. The band stand was down at the end under a cluster of Chinese lanterns.

There were fifty or sixty people in the place. On one side were the women, most of them young, and many of them highly decorative. The men filled the benches on the other side.

The three men sat down. "Not bad," Patridge said. "Not bad at all. I'm beginning to appreciate Chanford."

"How does one conduct oneself at an affair like this?" Oscar inquired.

"One bids," Patridge explained. "One sees a likely-looking box and makes an offer. If one is lucky, one gets a satisfactory meal and a winsome wench."

The band leader struck a Byronesque pose, ran his fingers through his wild black locks, waved his baton, and his musicians hit it with everything they had, then stopped playing. Winters gave the folks his best smile, grabbed a box at random, held it up and demanded a bid. He got half a dozen.

It was simple enough to tell who went with the lunch. All you had to do was look across the room and spot a girl with a coy look, and watch her face. When a fine upstanding fellow made an offer, she'd turn the light on.

PATRIDGE got some competition from a hulking red-neck with the wide-open spaces written all over him. The bid went to three dollars and a half, and the red-neck gave up. That seemed to be all the Amazon was worth to him. Patridge took his two prizes out on the wide moon-drenched porch. For two-seventy-five, Oscar got a red heart with a white ribbon on it, and a blonde wisp in a green sweater. Burke paid four dollars for a medium-sized box and a six-foot brunette with a remarkable figure. Humphrey bided his time. He had his eye on a girl with pale-gold hair. Presently she put her hand up to her full lips, and that seemed to be a signal, for a giant in rough tweeds with a pipe stuck in his face offered five dollars for the pink-bowed box in Winters' hand.

"Five-fifty," Humphrey said, and got a scowl from the giant.

"Six," said the giant.

"Seven," said Humphrey.

"Eight," said the giant.

"Ten," said Humphrey. The girl smiled. The giant saw the smile, flushed, and chewed on his pipe-stem.

"Sold to the lucky gentleman in the rear," said Winters.

The girl stood up. So did Humphrey. The top of her head reached his shoulder, and she smelled of Christmas Night. He liked the feel of her small hand on his arm. Apparently this was an old story to her, for she led him out on the veranda and down some steps and along a path through the willows, and then they were in a little grass-covered clearing with the moon looking down at them and the river sliding past.

"I hope you can fight," she said.

"Why?" Humphrey broke the ribbon, pulled the paper off the box. He wondered if what was inside was worth ten bucks.

"You've got one on your hands," the girl said. "Joe's pretty mad."

"So that was Joe." Humphrey found some fried chicken, and that made him feel better.

"Didn't he have ten bucks?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "But he got jealous. He always gets jealous."

"What do I call you?"

"Priscilla."

"Priscilla which?"

"Anders," Priscilla said.

Humphrey lost some of his interest in the chicken. He said: "Well, well!"

"And you?"

"Charley Ross," said Humphrey.

"You're a liar. I saw your picture in the paper."

"You see, I know your father," said Humphrey. "I don't think that your father would approve."

"He wouldn't. He says you'll be in jail before this is through."

"He's optimistic."

Priscilla laughed. Humphrey decided to forget her father was the Sheriff. It wasn't hard to do. . . .

But at length a husky voice shouted his name.

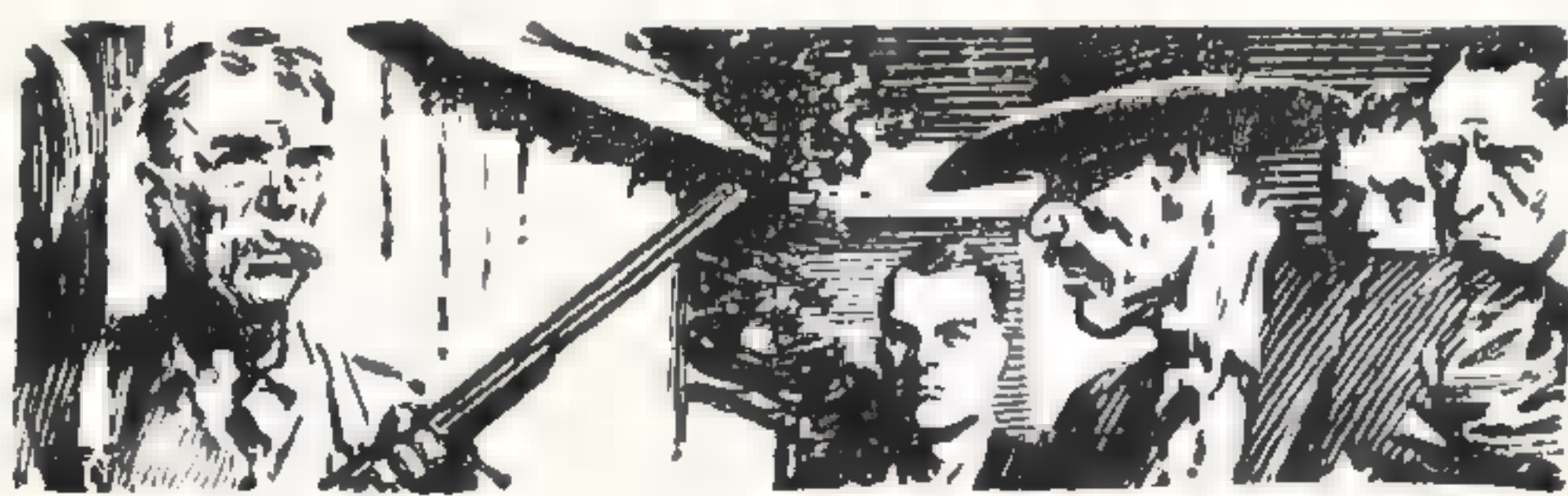
"Humphrey!" Oscar was calling.

"Damn," Humphrey said. Then he called: "Here, Oscar."

Oscar barged panting along the path, stopped in the clearing. He looked at Priscilla and rolled his eyes. He said: "Ah. With beauty in the sylvan glade!"

"Now what?" said Humphrey.

"Mr. Martin phoned," said Oscar. "He's a bit upset. It seems that Miss Mesdrell has disappeared and there is hell to pay."



CHAPTER VIII

AS Humphrey stopped to open the gate, a siren knifed the soft silence, and down by the barn the peacocks started crying. Jay Martin was standing on the porch, his bony face grimly set.

"Ella called the Sheriff," Jay said. "I tried to stop her. So did Harry."

"What happened?" Humphrey halted at the top of the steps, looked down the hill. A car was crossing the bridge.

"She's gone; that's all I know," Jay said. "She didn't come down to dinner. Ella went up and rapped on her door awhile ago—looked in, and she wasn't there."

"No one saw her leave?"

Jay shook his head. "She could have gone out the back way without being seen."

"Take a car?"

"No. They're all here."

"Who saw her last?"

"I did." Jay's face was stonier than ever. "At four. We had a row."

That, Humphrey thought, was pretty apparent. He said: "I suppose you called her a liar."

Jay nodded.

"Something like that. Damn it, Campbell, she *was* lying. She wouldn't face Anders. Why?" He didn't wait for an answer. "This looks bad for her. But I can't believe it. She couldn't have killed him."

Humphrey didn't say anything, because Anders and a couple of deputies were piling out of the car. The Sheriff clumped up the steps, looked sourly at Humphrey. "She can't get away, Mr. Martin. We'll have her in an hour."

The announcement didn't cheer Jay. That seemed, Humphrey thought, what he was afraid of. Jay motioned to the door, followed the Sheriff into the living-room. Harry brooded over a little fire; Ella looked smugly triumphant.

Anders rumbled: "This is the break I was waiting for."

Harry's voice was fish-cold. "I suppose the complaint's drawn up."

"If it isn't, it should be." Ella's eyes poured spite at her brother. "The fortune-hunting—"

"You've said enough," Harry snapped.

"She won't get far." Anders seemed a little confused by all the venom in the air. "Can't. Luckily, we got all the roads blocked, looking for those dirty reds. We broadcast her description right away. They'll get her. . . . How'd she get away?"

"I imagine she had a friend." There was enough acid in Ella's voice to corrode the words.

"She make any phone-calls today?"

"Probably," Ella said. "She had plenty of opportunity."

Anders found a chair, sat on the edge of it. Plainly, he counted on Ella as an ally, for he directed his questions at her:

"Have you looked at her things, Mrs. Carpenter?"

Ella nodded vigorously, happily. "Yes. I believe she had three grips. If I remember, there was a wardrobe-case. It isn't there."

"I'll have a look," Anders said. Ella jumped at the suggestion, led him hurriedly upstairs. Jay swore under his breath. Audibly, he asked: "What do you think, Campbell?"

"I think too many people are holding out information," Humphrey said. "Right now, it looks bad for Miss Mesdrell. It looks to me as though she's shielding someone, and I'm damned if I know who."

Alex found his voice. "Couldn't she be protecting Burke? Couldn't she be working with him?"

"Keep out of this." Harry got up, moved toward Carpenter.

Alex looked a little frightened, but said: "I've got a right to speak. My wife has a third interest in the Sycamores, and I'm going to help her protect that interest. It looks like the girl and Burke are working together to steal what belongs to us." He stopped for breath, added doggedly: "I won't have it."

THE Sheriff's heavy feet banged on the stairs. He came into the living-room, and satisfaction was written all over him. "Skipped out, all right," Anders said. "But don't worry. She can't be far off."

"But why?" Humphrey said.

"Why what?" Anders challenged.

"No motive," Humphrey said. "The will that gave her a motive doesn't seem to exist."

"It's around somewhere," Anders said positively. "You can be sure of that. We'll find it hidden around here somewhere."

"Wait a minute," Harry said. "If Father signed it, it had to be witnessed."

Ella, standing by the door, gave a lady-like grunt. "Perhaps someone with a deep interest in Miss Mesdrell witnessed it with her." She was smiling at Harry, and the smile wasn't a nice thing to see. "Was that note you were reading just before dinner from her, by any chance?"

HARRY flushed, and from the look in his eyes there wasn't much doubt who had written the note. Anders took a couple of steps toward him.

"That note concerns only me," Harry said.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dunecht," Anders said doggedly. "But if she wrote a note, I must see it. If necessary, I'll search you."

"Not without a warrant."

Jay spoke, and his voice was gentle. For the first time he seemed to have some respect for his half-brother. "Give it to him, Harry. Whatever it is, it can't make matters worse than they are. You've got Anders thinking it's a confession."

Harry started to refuse, then resignedly said: "All right." From his pocket he took a bit of paper, thrust it at the Sheriff. Anders pounced on it, read it and said: "Ah."

Ella moved farther into the room. "We're entitled to see that, Mr. Anders," she announced. "Perhaps you better read it to us."

"Sure," Anders said. "I'll read it. Listen to this." He cleared his throat. "'Harry,'" he read. "*I know you'll understand, even though I can't explain. I may need a lawyer. When I do, will you help me?*" It's signed, 'Katherine Mesdrell,'" Anders added.

The room was quiet for a moment. Alex Carpenter spoke first. "Now we're getting somewhere," he said.

"We sure are." Anders' forefinger probed in the depths of his mustache. He gave Harry a hurt, suspicious look. "Would you mind explaining this, Mr. Dunecht?"

"You know as much about it as I do," Harry said. "Ch'en brought it to me in the library before dinner."

"We'll have a talk with him," said Anders. "Get him."

With alacrity Ella went to the dining-room door, reached inside and jerked a bell-cord. A moment later the Chinese stood on the threshold of the living-room, his old face expressionless as a piece of carved ivory.

"Come in," Anders said harshly. "I want to talk to you."

Ch'en Tu came in, stood waiting, looking at the carpet. "Yes."

"Did you take Miss Mesdrell away from here?" Anders snapped.

"No sir."

"When did you see her last?"

"At half after four. She came into the kitchen."

"With a note?"

"For Mr. Harry," Ch'en Tu said. "She gave me a note to deliver to Mr. Harry."

"What happened then?"

The Chinese shrugged. "She went out of the kitchen."

"Look here!" Anders' contempt for aliens was very evident. "Miss Mesdrell has disappeared, see? What do you know about it?"

Ch'en Tu's thin shoulders moved imperceptibly. "I was preparing dinner. I know nothing."

"How'd she get away?"

"Perhaps in a car. Perhaps she went riding. Perhaps she used one of the boats."

Anders slapped his leg. "Didn't think of that. You got boats here?" He directed the question at Harry.

Harry was scowling at the Chinese and seemed ready to cut his throat.

Ch'en Tu nodded. "There's a landing below the barns."

"We'll take a look," Anders said triumphantly. And with that he led the way out of the room.

MOONLIGHT was spilled all over the hillside, and from the river came a faint murmur. Ahead of Humphrey the other men moved in single file, not speaking. The path led over a stile into a sloping pasture; under an old oak, some sheep were lying, and their fat, white bodies had a ghostly quality. The peacocks set up a horrible outcry, and then a man came out of the little shack huddled against one of the big barns. He had a shotgun in his hand. Harry's voice called: "It's all right, Mason."

Anders asked gruffly, "Who's this?" and pointed at the man with the shotgun.

"The stableman," Harry explained.

Mason came closer, limping a little. "What's happened?" He sounded afraid.

"Any horses missing?" Anders asked.

"No sir."

"Do you know Miss Mesdrell?"

"Yes sir. Of course."

"See her around the barn tonight?"

"No sir. I haven't seen her all day. Nothing's happened to her, I hope."

Anders grunted. He said: "No. Where's the boat-landing?"

Mason pointed southeast. "Down there, sir. Couple of hundred yards."

"See anyone go down that way tonight?"

"No sir. No one. But there's a path from the bridge along the bank."

"We'll have a look at the boats," Anders decided.

"That's all, Mason," Harry said. "I'll show him." The gnome went back to his shack, stood on the steps watching them. Harry led the way around the corral and along a ditch-bank to a barbed-wire fence and over a stile. The path angled left across the rich bottom land, through some willows and came out on a small sandy beach. A wooden platform led out into the sluggish water and there were two boats rubbing their noses against the old pilings. Anders stood on the shaky structure pointing down at the boats. He said: "Well?"

"There should be three," Alex said excitedly. "There should be a little one."

Anders turned, stared at Harry. "Well?" he repeated.

"Carpenter's right," Harry admitted sourly. "The little skiff isn't here."

Without a word, Anders turned his back to the river and hurried along the path to where the great house brooded under the cold moon.

Humphrey didn't go in. At the front steps he told Jay: "There's nothing I can do tonight. I'm going to bed. If anything happens, call me."

"Sure," Jay said absently, and followed the Sheriff inside. Humphrey got into his car and drove down the hill.

IT was still early, not midnight yet, but Chanford was quiet. Only the bar was open, and that wasn't doing any business. Humphrey drove his car onto the vacant lot north of the hotel. There was a big roadster parked in front of the hotel; and when he came around the building and started up the steps, someone shouted at him: "Hey, you."

He turned. A big man was getting out of the car; and by the look of him, he meant business. The man was his rival for Priscilla's box-lunch.

"She said you were a jealous guy," Humphrey said.

Joe came closer. He had his fists up, and his jaw tucked into his left shoulder. He said one short and ugly word.

"Such language," Humphrey said. "By God, us Westerners resent words like that." Something shot at him, and he jerked his head to the left, but not quite far enough. Then he was sitting on the steps, and the stars were doing tap-dances all around him. He shook his head, saw Joe standing in front of him in a John L. Sullivan stance. Joe looked bigger than ever.

"Uncle!" Humphrey said.

"Get up." Joe talked through his teeth.

"What for?" Humphrey asked. "She isn't worth it, Joseph."

"Get up," Joe said. His hand shot out, reached for Humphrey's coat. That was a tactical error. Humphrey caught Joe's wrist with his left hand, flicked his foot out and hooked Joe's leg, hit him with his right fist. Joe sprawled in the dirt. When he bounced up, Humphrey hit him again and stood over him.

He thought about putting his foot on Joe's chest and giving the ape call.

Joe sat up and rubbed his left eye.

"Still want to play, Joseph?"

Joe didn't say anything, just sat there with his fingers caressing his eye.

"You pique my interest in Priscilla," Humphrey said; then he dusted the seat of his pants, straightened his tie and went back around the building to where his car was parked. Five minutes later he walked into the Pavilion and looked around for the Sheriff's daughter. She was dancing with Oscar. They saw him, danced across the crowded floor to where he stood.

"Thanks, pal," Humphrey said, and took Priscilla in his arms.

"You're a trifle disheveled," Oscar said. "Cops?"

"Some thugs waylaid me," Humphrey said. Priscilla snuggled close to him, giggled. They moved off slowly.

"I guess you'll have to take me home," Priscilla said.

"Your father will love that," Humphrey said.

"Sometimes a girl doesn't tell her father everything," Priscilla said.

FOUR hours later, when he stopped the car in the suburbs of the town, opened the door and lifted her down, he had quite forgotten his antipathy for matrimony. The moon was gone, and a wan darkness lay on the lawn sweeping up to the Anders stoop. In the east the stars were going out. He cupped her face in his hand, bent down and kissed her.

"You're a swell guy, Humphrey," she whispered, and her eyes were starry.

His hand fumbled with her pale hair. He asked softly: "May I come back?"

She nodded, pointed to the corner. "Meet me there."

"Six-thirty," Humphrey said, and he kissed her again.



CHAPTER IX

IT seemed to Humphrey at nine o'clock when someone started trying to kick the door in, that he had just fallen asleep. "Come on," a voice said. "Open up." The voice was heavy with authority.

Humphrey stretched, swung his bare feet down, moved to the door and opened it. A man with big ears, a nickel-plated star and a rifle stood in the opening.

"Good morning," Humphrey said. "I'll have coffee and a *brioche*."

"You'll have a sock in the puss." The man barged into the room, prodded Humphrey with the rifle. "This is a pinch."

Humphrey got his hat off a chair, put it on. "I'm ready, Officer."

"Get your clothes on," the man said.

"You don't want me this way?"

"You aint funny," the deputy snapped. "Get dressed."

Humphrey shrugged, went into the bathroom and shut the door. He shaved, taking a good deal of time, then stepped under the shower. Pretty soon the deputy banged on the door and yelled at him to hurry. Humphrey paid no heed. When he came out of the bathroom, he had a towel wrapped around him.

"Gawd, you're slow," the deputy said.

"But clean, Officer. Turn your back, I'm modest."

"No need dressing up," said the deputy, watching him pull on a pair of green silk socks. "They don't care how you look where you're going."

"I believe in making a good impression." Humphrey found a pair of striped shorts and a silk undershirt and put them on. He took the pins out of a white shirt with his monogram on the pocket, and put that on.

"You'll get a chance." The deputy laughed heartily. "Making impressions on rocks up the river."

"That's pretty good," Humphrey said. "Yes sir, you got a real sense of humor." He went to the closet and took a gray flannel suit off a hanger. "Mind telling me what I'm pinched for?"

"Shake-down," said the deputy.

"Oh, that." Humphrey dismissed it with a wave of his hand, knotted a green tie carefully, examined himself in the cracked mirror. There was a bump over his left eye, a blue shadow under the eye. He wondered if Joe looked any better. "Then I'm going to have company."

"Sure. Your pals are waiting downstairs. Both of 'em."

"That's fine," Humphrey said. "I hate to do road-work with strangers."

"Come on." The deputy led the way to the hall, stopped and let Humphrey get in front of him. Humphrey went downstairs with the deputy right behind him, waved to Oscar, sitting disconsolately on a wicker chair beside another rifle-carrier, and headed for the dining-room. Burke and his guard were eating waffles. Patridge was bandying words with the Amazon. Humphrey dropped down beside him, smiled at the waitress.

"I know," the Amazon said. "Cod-dled." She went away. The deputy pulled out a chair and sat down.

"My bodyguard," Humphrey said. "You ought to get you one. How'd you make out last night?"

"She lied about her culinary ability," Patridge said. "But—" He wiggled his eyebrows. "And you?"

Humphrey jerked his thumb at the deputy. "Too good. She was the Sheriff's daughter."

Patridge choked. "Nice to have known you, pal."

"It has been nice." Humphrey gave his attention to his breakfast. After a while he pushed the plate away, took a pencil from his pocket, scribbled an address on a paper napkin. "On the dresser in my room, you'll find a ledger. Get it. Then go to this address. There's a guy named Elmer Weyant there. Bring him over to Anders' office. Tell him not to forget the book. He knows which one."

"Okey doke," Patridge said.

"Use that term again, and you're fired," Humphrey said.

PATRIDGE grinned, picked up his check and departed.

"Lead on, Officer," Humphrey said.

"I'm ready to face the music."

"Get going, then," the deputy said.

Burke studied an old map of the county on the wall back of Anders' desk. In the next chair Oscar fidgeted nervously. Humphrey made himself more comfortable in the old leather armchair and watched Ella Carpenter. She certainly knew how to dress, he decided. Alex didn't. He was trying, apparently, to look like a gentleman farmer, and riding breeches didn't suit him. Alex didn't look happy. Neither did Anders; he was as full of meanness as a yellow-jacket.

"It's up to you," Anders said. "Either you leave town today, or Mrs. Carpenter goes before the grand jury."

"You've got a lot to learn," Humphrey said. "Where I come from, they rattle handcuffs at this point."

"Then you won't leave town?"

"Do you want us to very much, Sheriff?"

"I'm giving you a break. Ask Mrs. Carpenter. She came here this morning demanding action. I persuaded her to wait."

"Your brother know about this?" Humphrey smiled at Ella.

"My brother isn't important," Ella had Harry's colorless, precise voice. "I was present when a demand was made for money—and so was my husband. I think our word is sufficient in Joaquin."

"Unless," said Humphrey, "we have a legitimate claim."

"Unless." She gave the word a fine ring of finality.

HUMPHREY took a silver dollar from his pocket, tried to balance it on his palm. "Why are you so anxious to get us out of town, Mr. Anders?"

The Sheriff glowered. "Don't want to clutter up the courts with guys like you. Don't want you around town. I've got a murderer to find and convict. And a couple of radicals to catch. But by God—pardon, Mrs. Carpenter—if you keep asking for it, I'll give you the works."

"Doesn't the district attorney do anything in this county?"

The veins stood out on Anders' temples. He slammed the desk with the flat of his hand. "All right, Mrs. Carpenter. You can go to the grand jury."

"Quit bluffing," Humphrey's voice was mild. "You want us out of town. Both of you want that, and for different reasons. I know your reason, Mr. Anders. A guy with a black eye has been talking to you. I have a hazy notion why Mrs. Carpenter is anxious to see our dust. She's afraid I know something."

Ella took a deep breath, shot a curious glance at him from under the fine line of her dark eyebrows. Alex found his voice: "Look here, Campbell. I won't have you—" The sentence trailed off. Ella had transferred her gaze to her husband's countenance. "What could you know?" Ella asked mockingly.

"Guess," said Humphrey, watching the door. Men were talking in the other room, and he recognized the voices. The door popped open. The Sheriff's clerk blinked at them. "The rescue party," Humphrey said. "Send them in, pal."

BEHIND the clerk was Harry, and behind Harry was Patridge, and the detective had another man by the arm, a bantam of a fellow with scant red hair and freckles the size of husky rain-drops.

"You all know Mr. Dunecht," Humphrey said. "The other two gentlemen are Mr. Patridge and Mr. Weyant. Maybe you know Mr. Weyant already." Anders was fuming, apparently speechless. "Mr. Weyant is a dentist," Humphrey went on. "His father was a dentist. His father, praise God, was Larry Pelham's dentist. Sit down, gentlemen." He nodded to Harry. "Your appearance is most opportune."

Harry spoke to his sister in a taut voice. "What's the meaning of this?"

Ella didn't answer him. She was watching Patridge. He had two books under his left arm, and he tossed them into Humphrey's lap, saying: "There you are, General."

Humphrey rose, crossed to the Sheriff's desk and put the books on top of it. He opened one, placed it in front of Anders, took a paper out of his pocket and put that beside the book. "Here's our proof. Take a look."

Anders took it.

"See how it is?" Humphrey said. "That paper is your dental chart. That book was kept by Dr. Weyant's father. In November, 1893, he crowned three teeth for Larry Pelham, filled two others." He opened the second ledger, put it on top of the first. It was the book he had taken from the shop of Jesus Alvarez.

Anders sat there looking at the opened ledger; and though he tried to hide it, you could tell he was impressed.

"Well, Mr. Anders?" Harry said.

"There doesn't seem to be any doubt about it, Mr. Dunecht," Anders said. He transferred his attention to the dentist. "There's no possibility of a mistake?"

Weyant shook his head. "No sir."

Ella rose abruptly, jerked her head at her husband, and flicked a contemptuous glance at Burke. He smiled at her, stood up and said: "My dear cousin, I won't be here to annoy you long. As soon as I convince you of my kinship, I'll depart. I'm afraid you'll wish you had settled this matter when I was willing to take peanuts."

Ella sniffed, gave Humphrey some of her scorn. "How about it, Mr. Campbell?"

Then Humphrey said something he was to regret for a long, long time, something that was to shove him very close to the threshold of death. A grin put wrinkles at the corners of his brown eyes. "Mr. Burke's ancestry is a relatively simple problem, Mrs. Carpenter. There's another, a really tough one."

"What else?" Her dark eyebrows moved up, her hard, dark eyes probing.

"Proving who killed your father," Humphrey said.

"You know who killed him?"

"Who killed him, and why?"

"What are you waiting for?" Harry shot the question at him.

"Proof," Humphrey said; and seeing the expressions on the faces turned to him, he wished he had kept his mouth shut. He asked Anders, "Do you still want to lock us up?"

Ella didn't give the Sheriff an opportunity to answer. "And deprive us of your valuable services, Mr. Campbell? Oh, no. Great detectives are so rare. Come on, Alex." Her husband jumped up and followed her from the office.

Humphrey turned an inquiring glance on the Sheriff. "Beat it," Anders said roughly. "As for knowing who killed Mr. Dunecht, you're not the only one. You don't have to be a master mind to figure that out."

"I wouldn't pin all my hopes on Katherine Mesdrell," Humphrey smiled from the doorway. "Anyway, you've got to find her."

Anders returned the smile. "That doesn't take a master mind, either!"

AS Humphrey came down the steps of the hotel, the dusk hinted that summer was coming. He stopped for a moment and stared through the gathering darkness toward the invisible hills.

He considered going back for his accordion; then he decided against it. The combination of Priscilla and the accordion would make him romantic, and right now he had no business getting romantic.

He looked at the sky again, and was aware, suddenly and pleasurably, of the river and the frog-chorus and an owl asking a mournful and monotonous question. Life seemed ridiculously simple, at that moment, complicated not at all by such things as diaries and wills and missing girls and murder. He smiled to himself, and went along the walk to the opening in the cypress hedge behind which his car was parked, and through the opening. And then—something had him by the legs, and he was face down in the dirt and someone was on his back. He felt one quick stab of pain and then darkness closed over him, black, impenetrable, absolute.

THE edge of the moon appeared above the ragged mountain wall, diluting the dark. The girl standing near a cottonwood tree at the corner of San Miguel and Eighth streets, in the suburbs of town, glanced at the luminous dial of the tiny watch on her wrist, looked up and down the streets, and said aloud: "That's that." She sighed and went slowly along the street, turning finally up a brick walk edged with petunias.

Lou Anders, Sheriff of the county, looked up from his newspaper and called; "That you, Priscilla?"

"It's me," Priscilla said.

"Thought you'd gone out," Anders said.

"Changed my mind."

"Joe called ten minutes ago," Anders said. "Wants you to call him back."

"He can wait," Priscilla said and went on up the stairs. But when she reached the extension phone on the table in the upper hall, she hesitated, dug a knuckle into her soft cheek, then picked up the receiver and dialed a number. . . .

The night might be warm, but the river wasn't. The Baptist minister's three kids came out of the water yelling at the top of their voices, and ran up the sand-bank, slapping their hands against their bare flanks.

"Jeez, it's cold," the littlest boy said.

"I'm gonna tell Pop," one of his brothers warned. "I'm gonna tell Pop you swore."

"I'm gonna build a fire," the third boy said, "a great big one."

"Fire, fire!" the littlest boy chanted.

"Get some wood," the biggest boy ordered.

"Bong, bong, I'm a fireman," the littlest boy chanted, and ran up the beach, stopping every now and then to grab a

chunk of driftwood. Then he let out a yell that could have been heard in Chanford, a quarter of a mile downriver, and came running back to his brothers. "Dead," he yelled. "A man dead."

The two bigger boys stood there for a minute, looking at him, not believing him; and then they saw he was crying, so they ran up the beach, and there on the sand-bank was the body of a man lying face down on the sand with most of him in the water. As they stared at the body, it moved a little, and the biggest boy grabbed hold of the man and tried to pull him out of the water; then his brother grabbed hold too, and together they dragged him up on the sand. Then they ran to where their clothes were, put them on and went crashing along the trail leading to the river road, shouting for help as loud as they could shout. Jay Martin, driving in to Chanford in the station-wagon, jammed on his brakes, drew alongside them—and then he was out of the little truck following them along the path to the river.

"There he is," the biggest boy couldn't seem to stop shouting. "Got rope around him. Wrapped all around him."

Jay bent over the figure lying on the sand, saw the round face of Humphrey Campbell, and said: "Good God!"



CHAPTER X

DR. CARMICHAEL came into the dingy, ill-furnished waiting-room of the Chanford hospital, wiping his hands on a threadbare towel.

"Damned if I know," Carmichael said, replying to the question in the faces of the two men in the waiting-room. One of the men was Jay Martin; the other was Oscar Morgan. "He's in bad shape."

"How bad?" Jay said.

"Basal fracture." The Doctor was casual. "Two knife-wounds in the back, deep ones. Missed his heart, that's all. Nicked the right lung. Buckets of water in him. He'll have pneumonia, sure."

"He's pretty tough." Oscar's voice was plaintive. "He'll make it. It takes a lot to kill him." Anyone could see he was trying to convince himself.

"I'll say he's tough," Carmichael replied. "From the looks of him, I'd say

he was very tough. Been in jams like this before. Scars all over him. Look like old bullet-wounds. One of them right smack through."

"He got that in Cuba," Oscar said.

"Nice guy," Carmichael said dryly.

"A swell guy." Oscar got belligerent again.

"I'm going to finish my dinner." Carmichael slipped into the coat and went out.

"Cold-blooded devil," Oscar hurled the statement at the door.

"He's all right." Jay's voice was kind. "As a doctor, that is. He'll do all any doctor can, which isn't much. If necessary, we'll get someone from Joaquin."

OSCAR let out a sigh you could hear across the street. "I wonder who did it, Mr. Martin?"

"I wish I knew," Jay's face was grim. "When we know the answer to that, we'll know who killed Stephen." He sat down wearily, pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his rumpled jacket, lit one. "By the looks of things, he walked into the noose of a lariat, and someone jerked it tight and spilled him, then whacked him with a monkey-wrench. The wrench came out of his car. I found it lying in the lot alongside the hotel."

"Burke could have done it," Oscar said. "He wasn't around the hotel when it happened. Went out around six, and isn't back yet." Oscar sighed again. "The damned fool, making cracks like that!"

"Like what?"

"He told us he knew who killed Mr. Dunecht."

"Us?"

"Me, Burke, Jimmy Patridge, your sister and brother. Her husband. The Sheriff. We were all there. Your sister had us dragged in. Wanted to pin a shakedown rap on us. He was too bright for her."

"I heard about that," Jay said. "But not about the crack."

"I'll bet that's what he got jumped for."

Jay nodded, pulled his eyebrows down. "So Burke was out. Well, the others were out too. All of them. Harry and Ella and Alex. God knows where they were. I got home around four, and they weren't home when I left a little while ago." The thought that his relatives might be implicated didn't seem to surprise him. He sat there frowning. "Did you call Anders?" he asked presently.

Oscar nodded. He got up. Jay regarded him for a moment and his eyes were tender. He said: "I think he'll make it, Morgan."

Oscar tried to smile. "Yeah. He's pretty tough."

Jay went through the door and across the porch. Then he turned and went back into the hospital. Oscar blinked at him. "I came back for a rope," Jay said. "The one that was wound around him."

MASON rubbed his stubbly chin, then yawned and took another look at the bloodstained rope. In his nightshirt, the stableman was more like a gnome than ever.

"That come from here," Mason said. "See that loop? I made her." He yawned again.

Jay's lean, bony face got grimmer. He jerked his head toward the barn. "Who could get it without you seeing them?"

Mason shoved his hand under his nightshirt and scratched his chest. "Maybe she didn't come from the barn."

"Where, then?"

"The tank-house," Mason said. "Lot of ropes in the tool-shed in the tank-house. If she come from the barn, somebody from the house got her. No outsider's been in the barn."

"Who was in the barn today?"

"Mr. Harry come down this morning before he went into town. Took a look at the new colt. Mr. Alex was in a couple of times."

"Thanks," Jay said. He made his way along the walk at the south side of the house, past the windows of Stephen's bedroom, and all around him were the ghosts of dead years. The tank-house door was unlocked. He found the light-switch, turned it on. The tool-room was just as he remembered it, a square, low-ceilinged place filled with the smaller farm implements, with seed-bins, and worn-out saddles and harness. In the corner, an iron stairway spiraled upward, disappeared through a hole in the ceiling, climbed past the big tank to the watch-tower where the Senator used to sit with his rifle in his lap watching the river road.

Slowly Jay crossed the room to the south wall, where coiled lariats hung on pegs. Mason was right, he thought. The rope could have come from this room. Suppose it had, what then? He puzzled with the question for a while, realized the significance of the answer. It added

other names to the list: the names of Ch'en Tu, Ella, and Katherine Mesdrell. Desperately, he tried to put suspicion from him. Stephen had loved her, and Stephen was seldom wrong about the people he loved. Then he remembered her sudden flight and the note to Harry. And now this length of rope. A sound made him turn. Ch'en Tu was standing on the threshold.

"Pardon," the Chinese said. "I saw the lights go on. I didn't know it was you, Mr. Jay."

"Was anyone in here today?"

"I saw no one," Ch'en Tu said. "That signifies nothing. From the house one cannot see this doorway. Is something wrong, Mr. Jay?"

Jay nodded, but he didn't explain. "You been here all evening, Ch'en?"

"Yes, Mr. Jay."

"That's all," Jay said. Ch'en Tu bowed slightly and backed through the door. Jay crossed the room and watched him go toward the house, a black shadow under the trees. Jay switched off the light then, pulled the door shut, and went around the house.

THE living-room lights blazed, and when he came through the hall, he saw Harry, Alex and Ella near the fireplace. Their startled glances made him conscious that he had the coil of rope in his hand. He dropped it on a chair.

"Out branding calves?" Ella asked.

"Sure," Jay said. "Where were you all evening?"

"Why this sudden interest in my whereabouts?"

"You might as well find an answer," Jay said. "The Sheriff's going to ask you the same question."

Alex looked suddenly frightened. He said: "What—has something happened?"

Jay nodded to the rope. "That came from here."

"What of it?" Harry poured out some brandy, warmed the glass in his hands.

"Someone used it on Campbell," Jay said. "Tied him up in it, and knifed him, and dropped him in the river."

"Is he dead?" Ella seemed strangely disinterested.

"Not yet," Jay said.

Harry put the glass to his lips, drained it. "Let's have it," he snapped. "What happened?"

"Just what I said. Someone jumped Campbell and tried to kill him. He may die yet."

"Serves him right," said Ella.

"Shut up." Harry almost yelled at her. "Don't be such a damned fool. Don't you see what this means?"

She shrugged. "What?"

"You heard him," Harry said. "He said he knew who killed Father, and was hunting proof. Now this happens. I'm worried—about all of us."

Ella laughed without humor. "Not about our Katherine?"

Jay sprang to her defense. "A woman couldn't have done this. Campbell's too big. He was lifted into a car."

Alex spoke hurriedly. "Maybe someone helped her. I don't see what we have to do with it, anyway. Ella and I were in Joaquin. We had dinner in Joaquin and saw a picture."

"What picture?"

"Have they made you a deputy?" Ella asked.

"Listen, sweetheart," Jay said. "You may as well make up your mind where you were because you're going to have to prove it."

Ella gave him an angry look. "We saw 'Good-by, Mr. Chips.' Perhaps the girl in the ticket-office will remember us. Before that, we had a sandwich in a drive-in."

Jay turned to Harry.

"When the Sheriff asks me, I'll tell him," Harry said. "I was at my office." His glance rested on the rope. "How about Burke?"

"He's in it too," Jay said.

"If I were you, I'd leave this to the Sheriff." Harry poured out more brandy. "Particularly after what happened to Campbell."

"You sound ominous." Ella was watching her brother. "Did you waylay him, Harry? No, of course you didn't. You haven't that much spirit." Her glance moved to Alex, and there was contempt in it. "Neither have you."

"You're a lovely character," Jay said. He picked up the rope. "I'm going back to the hospital. I wouldn't go to bed, if I were you—not until Anders gets around to paying the Sycamores a visit."

CHAPTER XI

A DEPUTY, leaning on a rifle, stopped Jay on the hospital porch, then saw who he was and let him go in. Anders, who was talking to Burke, nodded curtly and kept on talking.

"So you haven't an alibi this time," Anders said.

"You heard what there is of it," Burke replied. He didn't look like a happy devil now. He was dourly angry, and that seemed to make the scar across his forehead more pronounced. "I know you'd like to pin this on me. It won't be hard, because I've only my word for where I was. But if you think I'm going to pieces over this, you've got me wrong. I'm selfish enough to want Campbell to pull through, because I can still use him. But if he doesn't, I'll get along."

"You're sure you went for a walk?" Anders persisted.

"That's what I told you. I walked south along the river. Stopped at the Pavilion for a sandwich on my way back."

"That's one part of your story I can check."

"Go ahead," Burke said. "I got there at seven-thirty."

"So you were walking an hour and three-quarters."

"About that."

"You must have taken a long walk."

Burke flushed. "Go ahead. Lock me up again."

"I'd like to," Anders admitted. "The trouble is, I'm convinced the same person who killed Mr. Dunecht, tried to kill Campbell. And you're accounted for in the Dunecht murder. You can go."

Burke rose, smiled bitterly at Jay. "I'll be at the bar if you'd like to see me later," he said as he walked out.

JAY tossed the rope in the Sheriff's lap. "That came from the tank-house at the Sycamores."

Anders blinked, forgot his anger at Burke. He said reflectively: "So did the other rope and the awl. Maybe I better run out there."

"They're waiting for you."

The Sheriff asked a few questions about Humphrey, listened frowningly as Jay told his story, rose finally. "I've put guards around this joint. Had Carmichael move him to the second floor. I'm convinced Campbell knew what he was talking about when he popped off this morning. He'd stumbled on something. This proves it."

"You know who heard him pop off," Jay said.

"Sure. That doesn't mean one of them did it."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, he went out to the Sycamores this afternoon."

"None of us was there."

"The Chink was," Anders said. "The private dick that Campbell uses went out with him. Said Campbell talked to the Chink."

"Where else did he go?"

"Out to old Fort Millerton. Above Friant," Anders said. "Left the car with the private dick in it near the old courthouse. Was gone for half an hour. When he came back, he said he was looking for mushrooms."

"There's nothing up there," Jay spoke as though to himself. "Unless he was interested in county history. All there is there, is the county's first courthouse, a few empty adobe buildings and a graveyard."

"You've got me," Anders said. "I'll take a run out to the ranch." With that, he was gone.

Jay went down the corridor looking for Carmichael, found him talking to a pretty nurse in a white silk uniform in the little operating-room. "No change," Carmichael said. "The fat guy's up in the room. He's pretty upset."

"What happened to Campbell's clothes?" Jay asked.

"Put away," the nurse said.

"Mind if I look at them?"

"Go ahead," Carmichael said. "Get them, Alice."

Alice got them. Jay ran his hands through the pockets. Save for a pack of cigarettes and a Junior G-Man badge, they were empty. He thanked the nurse, left the hospital and went to the hotel. He glanced through the register, got the number of Humphrey's room, then went around behind the desk, took the key out of the box, put it in his pocket and went quietly upstairs.

WHAT he expected to find in Humphrey's room, he did not know. There wasn't much besides clothing in the bureau drawer. There was a box of .38 cartridges, and there was a can with some black powder in it. Pasted on the can was a typewritten slip, "*Property of Sheriff's office.*" He lost interest in the powder when he came on some sheets of celluloid. The sheets were foils for fingerprint work. They hadn't been used. He looked through the suits hanging in the closets. He even went through the empty grips on the closet floor. They yielded nothing. In the worn armchair was the open accordion-case with the accordion in it. He wondered, sadly, if the good-natured Humphrey would ever play it again.

It struck him suddenly that there was something missing from Humphrey's belongings, and that something was Grandma's diary. Perhaps Harry had it. Or maybe Campbell had given it to Morgan or Burke. He must ask.

HE got up presently, switched off the lights and left the room. The lobby was still empty, and after he put the key back in its box, he went out into the night. Ahead of him the lights of Bill's place fell on the street. Someone had shoved a nickel in the automatic phonograph, and it was going full blast. Down at the end, Burke sat glowering, and there was a bottle of brandy in front of him. Jay felt anger at the man surging up in him. He pushed the door open and made his way to Burke's side.

"Hello," Burke said. "Have a drink."

"I didn't come in here to drink," Jay said.

"This is a bum place for a fight," Burke said. "Anyway, I've lost my enthusiasm for fighting. I'm sitting here being sorry for myself. Brandy always does that to me. Have some."

"Brandy makes me belligerent," Jay said.

"You don't need brandy," Burke said. He crooked his finger at the bartender. "Another glass, Bill."

Bill slid a glass along the bar. Burke poured a slug of liquor in it. Jay got on the stool and picked up the drink. His anger at the man was gone, he realized. He was too tired to be angry.

"Skoal," Burke said. "To Grandpa."

"Who was he?" Jay asked.

"I'd like to know," Burke said. "I hope he was the Senator. The Senator was a man after my own heart. He was a mean devil. I'm a mean devil."

"Right," Jay said.

Burke laughed. "I wish Grandma had been more specific. Odd woman, Grandma. Read her diary?"

"Sure," Jay said.

"I told you I was feeling sorry for myself?" Burke frowned at his glass. "You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because things are all messed up," Burke said. "I had my hands on a fortune, and now the guy who put my hands there is getting ready to kick off."

"You said you could get along without him."

"Maybe I can," Burke said. "Maybe I can, and maybe I can't. The Sheriff made me sore. He's a class-conscious old

hellion. He's working for you because you're a Dunecht."

"Not I," Jay said. "I sneaked in the back way."

"He forgets I may be a Dunecht too," Burke went on. "I'm going to put it up to a jury. I'm going to let a jury read Grandma's diary."

"Then you don't need Campbell?"

"He might have persuaded Harry to settle out of court," Burke said. "He's a persuasive devil."

"You want to settle?"

"I want to get out of this damned place!" Burke made a wry face, took a big drink. "It's full of death."

"How much, Burke?"

"Listen," Burke said. "Right now I'd settle for two bits. That's because I'm full of brandy. Let's not talk about it. Anyway, Campbell isn't dead yet. If he dies, we can talk settlement."

"If he doesn't?"

"I'll own half the Sycamores," Burke said.

Jay got off the stool. "Maybe. Thanks for the drink. Just because I drank it, don't think I like you. I don't. One of these days I'm going to pin your ears back."

Burke bowed. "I'll look forward to that."

As Jay started to get into the station-wagon, parked in front of the hospital, the deputy on the porch hailed him.

"Anders was looking for you," the deputy said. "Wants you to know they got 'em."

"Who?" Jay asked, and he was cold with fear.

"Miss Mesdrell and the Chink," the deputy said. "They were heading for the hills." The deputy grinned. "Got 'em over to the jail now."

"I better go," Jay said.

"Good night," the deputy called after him. Jay didn't answer. All the way to Joaquin he kept seeing Katherine's face, kept hearing that odd, lovely voice of hers. And over and over his mind kept saying, "She couldn't have done it, she couldn't."

ANDERS had Katherine and Ch'en Tu in jail, and that pleased him. But the fact that Harry Dunecht had stepped in to prevent him from giving the pair the works, didn't.

"Damn it," Anders grumbled, "you'd think at a time like this he could forget he's an attorney. What does he do? He steps up to them and tells them to keep

their traps shut until he can get 'em a lawyer. Says he can't represent them himself, because of the family, but he'll find a good man for 'em."

"Did they talk?" Jay asked.

"Not a peep," Anders said. "And if I hadn't been out to the Sycamores when we picked 'em up, she would be signing a confession now."

Anger at the big man surged in Jay, but he kept it under control. "Does it occur to you she might not be guilty?" he asked.

Anders gave him a disgusted look. "She's guilty as hell. Her trying to skip out proves it."

"But she had no motive," Jay argued.

"Don't you call a million bucks plenty of motive?"

"Unless that will turn up, she doesn't get a dime," Jay said. "We don't even know if Stephen signed it. Where was she hiding out?"

"In the tank-house. Up in the tower."

"I was in the tank-house tonight," Jay said. "I talked to Ch'en Tu in the tank-house."

THAT must have been why they decided to beat it," Anders said. "Got scared you were getting hot. Anyway, a little while after you left the place, they sneaked out and took Harry's car. Nobody in the house paid any attention, figuring it was you coming back when they heard the car."

Jay got up. "I'd like to see her for a minute."

"Go ahead," Anders said. He scribbled a note on a piece of paper, handed it to Jay. "That will get you in."

The air of the jail smelled of rust and stone and dirt. The turnkey was putting a bulletin on the messy square of black-board near the door, and a youth in a derby hat, a police reporter, was supervising the job.

"So he's still alive," the youth was saying. "That's not news. You can't kill a deputy by hitting him on the head."

"Why don't you go home?" the turnkey said. He stood back and surveyed the piece of yellow paper on which was written, "*Good News: Our heroic pal Clem Risley is putting up a real fight and the Doc gives him more than an even chance. Clem sends word that when we catch those fellows to keep them on ice for him. He wants first crack at 'em.*"

"That's a pretty sentiment," the youth observed. "A very pretty sentiment."

What I like about cops is their tremendous love for humanity. All I hope is, you don't catch 'em."

"We'll catch 'em," the turnkey said ominously. He saw Jay standing in the doorway. "What do you want?"

Jay took the paper out of his pocket. "To see Miss Mesdrell. Here's my pass. I'm Jay Martin."

The youth got up, looked at Jay admiringly. "I've read your stuff," he said, and there was respect in his voice. "My name's Agnew. I'm with the *News*. Any statement about this case, Mr. Martin?"

"No," Jay said.

"Come on," the turnkey said, took a bunch of keys out of his pocket and led the way down the corridor, up the stairs, through another gate and into a room with a long table in it.

"Hell of a time of night for visitors," the turnkey grumbled. His eyes cursed Jay and then he went out. . . .

There were footsteps on the iron floor, and Jay stood up, smiling excitedly.

She moved to the bench mechanically, and though her lithe body was hidden by a shapeless denim jumper, and though her hair was pulled severely back, she was beautiful to him. He said, "My dear!" And reaching across the screen that ran down the center of the table, he touched her cheek with his fingertips.

She drew away from him, said coldly: "You've changed since yesterday."

JAY was aware that the turnkey was still in the room. He motioned with his head toward the door. "If you'll look at that pass, you'll see that I'm to speak to Miss Mesdrell alone."

The turnkey shrugged. "Okay," he said. "I suppose you'll want to talk to the Chink too."

Jay shook his head. The turnkey went out.

"There was no need for that," Katherine said. "What we have to say isn't private."

"You were right," Jay said. "I've changed since yesterday. I've got sense."

"You said I was lying."

"I still think you're lying," Jay said. "I know now you had a reason. What that reason is, doesn't matter, because it had nothing to do with Stephen."

She looked at the table, and with the tip of her forefinger followed a scar in the wood. "Why do you say that?" Her voice was barely audible.

"Because I've found something out," Jay said.

She raised her eyes. They were even bluer than he remembered. "What?"

He fumbled for words, made momentarily inarticulate by the look of hope in her face.

"What?" She repeated.

Jay found his voice. "I love you," he said humbly. He didn't wait for an answer. He didn't need to wait. Her eyes told him what he wanted to know. She was in his arms, and her head was against his chest, and she was crying.

PRESENTLY Jay said: "We've got to get you out of here."

She sat up. Desperation returned to her eyes. "I know it. But how?"

"We'll tell Anders the truth."

"We can't. That's just the trouble. And I can't be here. I can't have it in the papers that I'm here and that I killed Stephen."

He frowned at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I was lying," she whispered. "I was down at the bridge that night." She took his hand, held it tight. "I met my brother down at the bridge that night."

Jay started to speak. She stopped him. "My brother is one of the men they're looking for. He's been trying to help the itinerant workers, trying to get them more money and better living-conditions. Ever since he finished college, he's been working here in the valley, using the name Jim Norse. That's because I was a teacher, and he knew if he used his real name, it might hurt me. You know how they feel in this valley about men who do what Jim is doing. They call them radicals and reds. But he isn't a red—really he isn't."

"Oh, my God," Jay said.

"If they find him now, they'll lynch him," Katherine said. "He won't have a chance. That's why I helped him get away. That's why I was afraid to let them question me."

"You know where he is?"

She nodded. "I won't tell you, because you'd go after him and tell him I'm in jail, and he'd come back here. He can't come back here yet."

Jay's voice hardened. "We've got to get him. You're charged with murder. He can prove you didn't do it."

She shook her head. "No. He can't come back until the feeling has died down."

"Did he hit the deputy?"

"No. He doesn't know who did it. They were all fighting."

"Maybe they won't lynch him. The farmers aren't vicious."

"They're angry," Katherine said. "The Sheriff's men have stirred them up, and kept them stirred up by telling them that Jim and Max Steiner are murderous reds. If the deputy hadn't been hurt, it would have blown over in a few days. But the other deputies won't let it blow over."

Jay sighed and nodded. He had seen, too often, what happened to men who picked on cops. He asked: "What happened Wednesday night?"

"Jim called me just after eleven. He had to have money. I went to Stephen. He was in bed. He told me the combination of the safe, and I opened the safe and got a hundred dollars. Then I went down to the bridge and waited, and after a while Jim drove along the river road and parked in the brush. Max Steiner was with him. Jim came across the bridge, and I gave him the money."

"Campbell saw you with him?"

SHE nodded. "When he opened the gate. I didn't get behind the tree quick enough."

"Did you see anyone else come along the road?"

"I saw you and Campbell drive in. No one else."

"How long were you there?"

"Almost an hour. I left Stephen just after eleven." She frowned at the table. "When I went out, I think someone was on the stairs. I thought I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. I turned around, and I think there was someone on the landing."

Jay said wearily: "You should have told Campbell all this. It might have helped him. I don't know how, but he might have been able to make something of it."

She put her hand to her lips, and her teeth closed over her forefinger. Tears beaded on her lashes. She said: "I didn't know who to turn to. Only Ch'en. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't know."

"You know now," Jay said and his arms went around her again. He asked: "Did you tell Harry this, tonight?"

She shook her head. "Don't," Jay said. "Harry's an attorney, and he can't have truck with radicals."

"Jim isn't a radical," she protested.

"There are two schools of thought on that subject," Jay said. "Harry will string along with the conservative school. He won't understand your brother's re-

sentment at being shoved around by cops."

"Do you?"

"I've been shoved around," Jay said.

She smiled, and then as suddenly as it had come, the smile went away. "What am I going to do, Jay?"

"You can't stay here," Jay said. "That's certain. If you bring your brother into it, they'll let you out but they'll grab him. May even try to pin all this on him. If you stay in jail, he'll turn himself in. There's one way out. . . . Make me a promise."

"What promise?"

"That you won't interfere. That you'll walk out of here and keep your mouth shut."

She knew then what he was getting at, and said sharply: "No. No, I won't let you."

"You must. It's the only thing to do. In a couple of weeks, you can bring your brother in safely. And Campbell isn't dead yet, remember that. Anything can happen in two weeks."

Still she protested. He argued, and finally she put her arms around him and held onto him as though she would never let him go.

"Promise," Jay said.

"I promise."

Jay kissed her. "All right," he called. The turnkey opened the door, jerked his head toward the corridor. "Come on," he told Katherine. She followed him back to her cell. Jay waited until the turnkey returned, then went down the stairs and out through the steel gate and back into the courthouse.

"All done?" Anders asked.

"Not quite," Jay said. "I came to tell you you could release Miss Mesdrell and Ch'en Tu. They didn't kill my stepfather. I killed him."



CHAPTER XII

HUMPHREY remembered, vaguely, going along endless hallways through darkness as thick as cotton wool. He remembered tremendous heads and little bodies, voices booming at him, then fading out. His fingers groped around, felt coarse linen. He realized he was in bed and asked: "What the hell is this?"

A cool hand rested on his forehead. Looking to the right, he saw a young woman in a white uniform.

"You mustn't talk," the young woman said. "Just you be quiet." Someone else was standing beside the nurse. He recognized Oscar.

"Hello, kid," Oscar's husky voice said.

"What's this strange woman doing in my room?" Humphrey asked. He didn't hear Oscar's answer, because he fell asleep. When he awoke, he knew he was in a hospital room, and had a vague remembrance of what put him there. He moved a little, and felt a pain like a knife sticking in his back.

Turning his head, he looked around. There was no one else in the room. Through a window he saw some trees and the shoulder of a green hill. He recognized the hill. Suddenly he felt very hungry and began hunting around for the bell-cord. The nurse stuck her head in the door. He knew he must be a whole lot better, because his interest in women was returning. . . .

"It was touch and go," Oscar said. "Touch and go." Oscar was looking tired, and thinner than usual. "But you made it, kid. Couple more weeks, and you'll be in a wheel-chair."

"How long have I been in this joint?" Humphrey asked.

"Eleven days."

Humphrey tried to sit up. He wished he hadn't, and lay back on the hard mattress, cursing while he waited for the pain to subside.

"ELEVEN days," Oscar repeated. "You missed the inquest and the funeral. It was quite an affair, the funeral. The whole county turned out."

"Never mind the funeral," Humphrey said. "What about the murder?"

"Oh, that." Oscar dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "Jay Martin confessed to that. He's in the can."

"Martin!" Humphrey disregarded the pain and lifted himself on his elbows. "He confessed?"

"The whole works," Oscar said. "The night they pinched the girl and the Chink. He went to see the girl and ran smack into his conscience. So he walked into Anders' office and confessed. He killed his stepfather. Then he tried to knock you off." The fat man rocked complacently.

"Either I'm wrong, or he's nuts." Humphrey lay back and frowned at the ceiling.

"Anders didn't think he was nuts," Oscar said. "Anders believed him. Soon as he pinched Martin, he took the guards off this joint."

"I couldn't be wrong," Humphrey said.

"No one's infallible," Oscar said. "But it's all over. Martin's in the can and the family is coming around to our point of view about a settlement. Harry offered us a hundred grand. We're asking two hundred."

HUMPHREY reached for the phone on the metal table. The effort was too much for him. He said: "Call Anders."

"That would spoil everything," said Oscar. "My boy, you underestimate me. You have underestimated me ever since I rescued you from a life of shame and set you up in a respectable business." Humphrey started to speak, but Oscar's lifted hand silenced him. "Being a man who loved ease, I allowed you to take the bit in your teeth," he went on. "But confronted by an emergency, I resumed command of Morgan and Company. Was I taken in by Mr. Martin's confession? I was not. Had I been, you would now be a dead turkey."

"You know who did it, then?"

"No," said Oscar. "I don't. I haven't the remotest idea. And I never was good at rebuses."

"You amaze me," said Humphrey.

"I know Martin didn't do it," Oscar went on, "because he told me he didn't do it. The day after he confessed, he called for me. I visited him in the can. A very loathsome place, by the way. Not on a par with the better cans with which I am familiar. He swore me to secrecy, then confided in me. The reason for his confidence was you, my dear fellow. He learned that the Sheriff had removed the guards from the premises, and he was afraid your assailant might return to finish the job."

"Go on," said Humphrey.

"Mr. Martin is in love." Oscar said the word disapprovingly. "The object of his affections is Miss Mesdrell and she was in a jam. He confessed to get her out of it."

"What kind of a jam?"

"He didn't say. He didn't trust me that far. As I said, the only reason he trusted me at all was you. I didn't press him on the subject. I took steps to insure your safety."

"What steps?"

"Mr. Patridge and I occupy the adjoining room," said Oscar. "We took

turns sitting up with you. It's been a strain."

"I'll be damned!" said Humphrey. "I didn't know you were so fond of me."

"I'm not," said Oscar. "I'm lazy. I need you in my business. That wasn't all. I spread the word about the village that you were fading away. No hope, I said. It may surprise you to know that the news caused a young woman to weep bitterly. You seem to have made a favorable impression on the Sheriff's blonde daughter."

"She's a nice girl," said Humphrey.

Oscar frowned. He changed the subject. He asked: "Who did it, kid?"

Humphrey disregarded the question. He said, "Oscar, before you, I am humble. You spoke of a *coup de grâce*. Tonight, we'll administer it. Get Anders and the guy who runs this joint in here. Then announce to the world I'm a corpse."

Oscar shuddered. He said: "Look, kid, I'm superstitious. You aint out of the woods yet."

Humphrey smiled fondly at the fat man. "Don't worry about hexing me; it can't be done. Tell them I'm dead. Then get Burke and go out to the Sycamores. Have Burke deliver an ultimatum to the Dunecht clan. Either settle forthwith, or he files suit."

"Maybe he won't do it," Oscar said.

"That's up to you," Humphrey said. "Persuade him. And after the settlement matter is threshed out, ask Harry this question in front of all the others."

"What question?" Oscar said.

And when Humphrey told him, the fat man frowned. "All right," Oscar said. "I'll do it. But it doesn't make sense."

"Another thing you can do," Humphrey said. "You can bring me my accordion and my gun."

Oscar heaved his body out of the rocker, shuffled through the door leading into the adjoining room, came back with the two articles. Humphrey put the gun under his pillow, and stroked the accordion lovingly. "Hand me the phone," he said.

OSCAR grunted, put the instrument within reach and went out. But he didn't go far. Humphrey had just told Harry Dunecht's secretary he wanted to talk to her employer, when Oscar's heavy footsteps rattled the floor-boards and he put his head inside the door.

"The blonde's downstairs," he said. "Shall I tell her you're a corpse?"

"Not her," Humphrey said, putting his hand over the mouthpiece. "Send her up in five minutes."

"That's what I thought," Oscar said, and departed.

AT five o'clock a black vehicle backed up to the Chanford hospital entrance. A discreet metal sign on the door of the driver's compartment said, "*Pade and Sons, Mortuary*." Two men got out, opened the door in the rear of the hearse and took out a long wicker basket. The men were big, hulking fellows, and they looked not at all like undertakers. They weren't. They were deputy sheriffs, but they had left their stars at home.

Dr. Carmichael held the screened door open for them and they went in, lugging the basket between them. After a little while they came out again, shoved the basket back into the hearse, slammed the door shut and took their places in front. As the hearse drove slowly away, Oscar Morgan crossed the hospital porch, went down the steps and made his way along the street to Bill's place. Burke looked up from his glass of brandy.

"All ready," Burke said. "Better have a drink first."

Oscar heaved himself up on the stool, let out a long sigh. "A beer," he said. "A very short beer."

"Try a brandy," Burke said.

"I don't feel like brandy," Oscar said.

"What the hell!" Burke said. "We've all got to die some time."

Oscar shuddered. "I'll forgo the beer," he said. "Let's get started."

Ten minutes later they sat in the living-room of the Sycamores with the Senator looking down at them as disapprovingly as ever. The light in the room was fading a little and down the hill the river had already been forsaken by the sun.

"What's your proposition?" Harry said. "I take it that's the reason we're all here."

Oscar nodded, glanced around him. Ella drew her lips together in distaste, favored him with a frown. Katherine was studying her knuckles. Alex was trying to look self-contained. "Right," Oscar said. "We want a final decision."

"Your price is still the same?"

"It is," said Oscar. "We feel we are being very fair."

"If we don't accept tonight, what then?"

"Tomorrow we go to court," said Oscar. "I think we have a very good

case. Had Mr. Campbell"—he said the name sadly, reverently—"lived, I'm sure there would have been no thought of a settlement. In view of what happened"—he cleared his throat—"I refer to the fatal attack on a member of the firm representing Mr. Burke, I feel that a jury will be more than fair in this matter."

Harry's voice made Oscar blink. He said: "All right. We'll settle. I'll draw up the papers tomorrow."

Burke stood up, bowed to them, a mocking smile playing around his lips. "Thank you, my dear cousins."

"Good-by, Mr. Burke," Ella said. "I won't see you again."

"May I ask one question, Mr. Dunecht?" Oscar said.

"Go ahead." Harry's tone was curt.

"It's about a registered letter and a package," Oscar said casually. "A letter and a package for Mr. Campbell." His glance roamed around the room, trying to find in the faces turned toward him some expression that would give him the knowledge Humphrey already possessed. "They came to General Delivery, and though I'm not sure what they contain, I feel it concerns this matter. How do I go about getting them, Mr. Dunecht?"

"Offhand I don't know," Harry said. "I'll look up the law on the subject and tell you tomorrow."

"Why bother about it?" Ella said, sending toward Oscar a cold, inscrutable glance. "You've got what you want."

"Not yet," Burke put in.

Oscar disregarded the others and spoke to Harry. "That's nice of you," he said and started for the door. As he went past Katherine, she caught his arm, and her blue eyes looked up at him for a moment. There were tears in them. Her lips framed the words, "I'm sorry."

CHAPTER XIII

THE Chanford post office wasn't one of those elaborate monuments decorated with murals showing farmers battling with the elements. It was no more than a cubbyhole in the corner of the general store standing by itself in a cluster of trees half a block up the street from Bill's place.

On this Monday night, when dark settled on the town, the post office seemed as deserted as usual. There wasn't a light in the place and the windows stared with blind eyes at the lonely street. But appearances were deceiving.

There were five men in the store, crouched behind counters and barrels and boxes, and they had rifles ready beside them. Out back, where the trees were close together, three more men lay waiting. Lou Anders had gone to a good deal of trouble setting the trap for the murderer of Stephen Dunecht.

AS usual, there wasn't much doing in Chanford. A few drummers dozed in the lobby of the hotel. Some lights showed in the windows of the weary little houses along the river bank, and down at the Pavilion a half dozen couples shagged around the floor. In Bill's place, five men swilled beer. One of them was Oscar. Another was Jimmy Patridge. They had been there since dinner-time and they showed no disposition to depart. That was part of the plan Humphrey had outlined to Lou Anders after the news was spread that he was a corpse. . . .

The hospital wasn't any too active. Lights showed on the porch, in the waiting-room, and in two of the rooms on the lower floor; but the upstairs was dark. There was one patient on the upper floor, but he wasn't advertising his presence in the place. He lay in the darkness, waiting; now and then he turned his head a little, and then he could see the shadowy trees and the little patch of sky beyond. There was a handful of stars making little holes in the dark cloth of the sky.

No one saw a figure slip through the darkness behind the hospital. No one saw the figure swing lightly up into a tree and crawl along a branch to the little balcony running around the upper floor. The man inched his way along the balcony, crouched under Humphrey's window, remained there listening, then moved along to the front of the place, where a door led into the hallway. Noiselessly the man went along the dark hallway, and then his hand was on the door-knob, and he was pushing the door open very slowly. He slid through the opening, and a shaft of light cut a hole in the darkness, framing Humphrey's face.

Humphrey blinked, tried to sit up, groaned with pain.

"Don't move," a voice whispered. The man went across the room, pulled the shade; then he went back to the door and switched the light on. Humphrey saw Burke standing near the foot of the bed, watching him. Burke had a gun in one hand, a flashlight in the other. He put the light in his pocket.

"So it was a trap," Burke said. "I was afraid it might be."

"I'm dead," Humphrey said. "Didn't they tell you I was dead?"

"Yes," Burke said. "But it seems they were a little premature." He put a chair beside the bed, sat on it.

"I underestimated you, Mr. Burke," Humphrey sighed. "What are you going to do?"

"Kill you, eventually," Burke said.

"That's silly, really," Humphrey said. "What will you gain by it?"

"It will be something pleasant to think about while I'm waiting to be hanged," Burke said.

"They don't hang people in California any more," Humphrey said. "They use gas."

"So they do," Burke said. He took a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket. "Smoke?"

"Thanks," Humphrey said. Burke got up, put a cigarette in Humphrey's mouth, lit it for him, lit one for himself.

"It was a good gag," Burke said. "It was so good I got suspicious, and decided to have a look up here."

"You were on your way to the post office?"

"No. Father's taking care of the post office," Burke said. "Of course you knew about Father. That's what the letter is about, isn't it?"

Humphrey nodded.

"It was a fine scheme," Burke said.

"Mine?"

"No, mine," Burke said. "It should have worked. If Dunecht hadn't known about Grandpa, it would have worked. When did you get wise?"

"When you told about the telephone-call," Humphrey replied. "That was a *faux pas*."

"Saying Stephen called me?"

Humphrey nodded. "And saying he told you Larry was alive. I knew then that Larry was dead. I knew then you were certain Larry was dead. Else you wouldn't have quoted Stephen Dunecht."

"BUT there must have been more than that," Burke's voice was calm, very pleasant.

"There was," Humphrey said. "There was a telephone with no fingerprints on it."

Burke frowned. "I put his fingerprints on the phone. I held his hand on the receiver."

"Not that one," Humphrey said. "The one in the upper hall of the hotel."

"Oh, Lord!" Burke said. "I forgot about that one. I told Father to wipe it off, and then I was in such a hurry getting back to my room I forgot to stop and put my prints on it."

"Anders forgot about that phone too," Humphrey said.

"Where did you get Father's prints?"

"Off a doorknob," Humphrey said. "But I was suspicious before the murder, Michael. Grandma's diary made me suspicious. The first thing that caught my eye was the piece about the pit and the door and the stone. I found the pit and the door, and moved the stone, and there was the skeleton. Just as simple as that! Yet you were in these parts for some little time and never thought of looking in the pit. It was too pat, Michael. Everything was too pat. To make a case, the skeleton had to be Larry. It was no trick to prove that it *was* Larry."

"WHEN did you find out about Grandpa's death?" Burke said.

"From an old newspaper," Humphrey explained. "The name *Burke* worried me. I went down to the *News* office and dug out the files for 1894, and found the story about a man named Larry Burke being shot in a brawl in a Fort Millerton saloon. The day you tried to kill me, I paid a visit to the Fort Millerton graveyard. Someone had been fooling around Larry Burke's grave."

"You're plenty tough," Burke said. "You should be dead."

"By the looks of things, I will be," Humphrey said. "Whose idea was this whole business?"

"Father's," Burke said. "He had been working on it a long time." He took out his watch, glanced at it. "Are the boys waiting at the post office?"

"A couple of them," Humphrey said.

"Father ought to be there now," Burke said.

"Don't be impatient," Humphrey said. "How'd you work it?"

"I borrowed Father's car and drove up the river to where we had a boat hidden," Burke related. "I rowed across, walked up to the house and climbed in his window. But not right away. There were two people in his room."

"Alex and Ella?"

Burke nodded. "You know about them?"

"I guessed about them," Humphrey said. "Nice people."

"Lovely people," Burke said. "I waited until they left and he turned the

lights off, and then I slipped in and dropped the rope over his head and stuck him with the awl. I got the rope and the awl weeks ago when I cased the joint."

"Simple," said Humphrey.

"Childish," said Burke. "I phoned the hotel and asked for myself, and talked to Father, who was waiting in my room. Then I wiped the phone off, put Stephen's hand on it, stuck the bell-cord in his hand and gave it a push. Then I beat it."

"Who was the penman? Father?"

Burke nodded. "He's an expert."

"You're a strange fellow," Humphrey said.

"So are you," Burke said. "There's only one thing I regret about this whole business. That's killing you. I don't look forward to the job."

"You might forgo it," Humphrey said.

"Oh, no," Burke said. "I can't do that. You've got to die." Again he sighed, and then the sound of a shot cut the sigh in half. It shattered the stillness of the night, and went echoing back and forth between the river bluffs. A look almost of pain came into Burke's face. He said quietly, "That will be Father," and raised his gun.

He didn't fire it. He didn't get a chance to fire it. Two guns went off at the same time. One was Humphrey's .38; he fired through the bedclothes. The other was a forty-five in the hands of Jay Martin, standing in the doorway leading into the adjoining room. It was a good thing Martin was there, because Humphrey's aim was bad, and his bullet smashed a picture on the wall.

Jay looked down at Burke, and shuddered. He said: "That's the first man I ever killed."

"I'm sorry," Humphrey said. "It was those damn' blankets."

JAY put the gun in his pocket, went to the window and let the shade go up with a bang. Not far away, men were talking in loud excited voices. He sighed. "Who was Father, Campbell?"

"The Pavilion guy," Humphrey said. "Winters."

Jay didn't speak. He stood at the window looking out at the night and his broad shoulders were bent a little, as though the death of Michael Burke weighed on him. Not until Anders came hurrying into the room, did he turn.

Anders stopped by the body. He said: "Good."

Jay shuddered. "Good night, Campbell," he said curtly, and stalked out.

"What the hell's the matter with him?" Anders stared at the door.

"Nerves," Humphrey said. "What happened to Winters?"

Anders jerked his thumb at the body. "He wouldn't stop." He took a letter and a package out of his pocket. The letter was from the War Department. The package bore the return address of the examiner of questioned documents, Los Angeles. "Your mail," Anders said, and waited expectantly.

Humphrey opened the envelope, handed the paper it contained to the Sheriff. It was a photostatic copy of the War Department's record on Paul Dunecht Burke. He broke the string on the package. Inside was Grandma's diary, and attached to it was Mr. Mook's report calling the last entry a forgery.



CHAPTER XIV

THE nurse squeezed the water out of the wash-cloth, fished the soap out of the basin and put it in the saucer on the stand. "Another week, and you'll be able to bathe yourself," the nurse said.

Humphrey ran his eye over the nurse's figure. "I don't know," he said. "It takes me a long time to get over things. You have nice cool hands, Alice."

The nurse nodded toward a vase of roses on the dresser. "You played the accordion for her," the nurse said. "You don't play it for me."

"I let you bathe me," Humphrey said. "That's a whole lot more personal."

The nurse flushed, took a bulky envelope from her pocket, dropped it on the bed. "Mr. Anders left that for you," she said. "He stopped by early this morning, and left it. Said the stuff inside came from a suitcase in Mr. Winters' room. It will keep you busy while I'm getting your breakfast."

"I'd rather have you," Humphrey said. She wrinkled her nose at him, picked up the basin and departed.

There were two documents in the envelope. One was a tattered, almost illegible letter on the stationery of a Sacramento hotel. The other, two closely written pages, bore the letterhead:

*The Pavilion, Chanford, Calif.
Lester K. Winters, Prop.*

Outside, a mockingbird was making a great to-do in a cottonwood tree; off toward the river, a bell rang insistently, and some kids went along the street talking in shrill, excited voices.

But Humphrey, staring at the documents, didn't hear the bird or the bell or the children. The past was all around him and it seemed to him that into the room, like the elusive fragrance of honeysuckle, came the ghost of Cordelia Dunecht. He saw her sitting in a dingy hotel room writing, forming the letters carefully, not crying, because she was beyond tears. She wrote:

*My dear Harriet,
At long last I turn to you, my sister,
for there is no one else.*

I hesitated many long and bitter hours before taking this step, and not until I went to the little church across the way and knelt in the cool darkness, was my mind made up. I asked God to forgive me. I asked Him for help. And in the quiet room I heard a voice saying your name.

Dear Harriet, I have sinned, and been punished for my sins. Again I know peace. Only a little while, and Larry's child will be born. I want a boy—another son. Paul—that will be his name, after our dear brother who died so long ago. I am not afraid. Why should I be, when the worst that can happen is for death to come? I don't fear death. There is so much far worse than death. There is that night of wind and darkness when Larry stormed out of the house—saying he would never return, that he had been a fool, that he had never loved me. There was that day I followed him to Fort Millerton and went on my knees to him and heard his wild, bitter laughter. There was the day I stood by his grave and asked God to strike me dead.

He is dead. He left me in April and found employment on a ranch in the foothills; from an acquaintance I learned where he was, and I swallowed my pride and followed him. He would have none of me, though I humbled myself before him, told him again and again of my love. For I will always love him.

Two weeks later came news that he had been killed in a fight in a saloon. As you know, we had lived as Mr. and Mrs. Burke, and they found my address in his effects. He was in the earth when

I reached Fort Millerton, so I never saw him again. He lies there now, under a barren hill, with only a rough board to remember him; and the letters burned into the board do not even spell his name. To the men who buried him, he was Lawrence Burke. So he must remain. His son will carry on that name, because the happiest moments in my life were when I was Mrs. Burke.

A few days ago I dug into my slender store of funds and took the train to Chanford. I rented a surrey and drove alone through the heat and dust along the familiar road, but when I reached the bluff and looked across the river at the great white house I had once called home, I could go no farther. To return would be a far greater sin than all the others of which I am guilty. I drove away.

*There is no money left. I know you will not fail me. Write to me as Mrs. Dunecht, General Delivery, Sacramento.
Cordelia.*

HUMPHREY put the letter aside and stared at the window for a while, thinking about Grandma. Odd, he thought, how things happen. In a measure, she was to blame for all this. Because she stood on the bluff and decided that it would be a sin to go back to her home, three men were dead—her two sons and her grandson. He wondered if Grandma's ghost was hovering around saying this was God's will.

He sighed and took up the second letter; and then he knew things he had only guessed before. He read:

I have a vague premonition that this is the end of Paul Dunecht Burke. If my visit to the post office is successful, I plan to destroy this. But something in Michael's manner when we flipped the coin to see which one of us would go for Campbell's mail, convinces me that a trap is waiting.

If it is a trap, I want you to know the whole story. Campbell, I'm sure, knew most of it. He and I will talk it over in hell, if that's where he's headed. From what I've seen of him, I imagine it is.

There is no need to dwell on my entire life. Paul Dunecht really died in 1918. He was reported missing; and that, as far as the world went, was the end of him. But he wasn't killed. He was captured and released at the end of the war. Because he had no desire to return to his wife, he changed his name. He became me, Lester K. Winters.

It wasn't until 1920 that I came back to the United States. The French authorities were responsible. They showed no admiration for my brilliant work with a pen, and considered reprehensible my ability to copy other men's signatures. If you want proof of my contention that I am an expert, my passport is kicking around somewhere. There isn't a genuine signature on it.

I spent two years in New York. Then a curiosity about my offspring brought me to California. I learned, with no sorrow, that my wife was dead. After some search, I located Michael. It was Michael who had my mother's few belongings.

Reading my mother's diary and her last letter, I conceived the plot which was to result in the murder of my half-brother. It was in 1925 when I hit upon the plan, but it was necessary to wait until my aunt died, three months ago, to execute it. You see, she would have given us away.

If I may say so, it was a brilliant scheme and should have been hole-proof. I moved to Chanford and bought the Pavilion. Became a respected business man, a member of the Rotary club and of the Chamber of Commerce. Even became an acquaintance of my half-brother.

Michael, I might add, was invaluable. It was Michael who discovered the gravel-pit, and it was Michael who dictated the entry which I forged in my mother's diary. It was Michael who moved my father's bones from the Fort Millerton graveyard to the crypt in the old powder-house in the pit. We knew it would be easy to identify the skeleton. You see, among my mother's belongings were receipted bills from a dentist and from a saddle-maker. A check revealed that the sons of these two men were following in their fathers' footsteps. We took it for granted that one or the other of them would still have their fathers' records.

At first the plan was for Michael to file suit against the Dunechts. With that in mind, he went to Los Angeles. It was there he heard about the firm of Morgan and Company. Its reputation appealed to him, so he went to see Morgan. You know what happened.

One thing we did not foresee—that Stephen knew about my father's death in 1894. It was not until Michael confronted Stephen that we were aware he knew it. Michael saw only one way out—to kill him. So he did.

Because no one had seen father and son together, it was a simple matter to furnish Michael with an alibi. It was I who was in Michael's room when Mrs. Owens rapped on the door. It was Michael who called from the Sycamores.

As I said, I regret the murder of my half-brother. He was a good man who had suffered a great deal. But when you come to think of it, death was a kindness. I have no feeling, one way or the other, for Campbell, though Michael rather liked him. . . .

That, my dear fellow, is that. Now I go after the mail.

Paul Dunecht Burke.

Humphrey put the letter back in the envelope. Then he pulled the phone on his chest and dialed the number of the Sycamores. Ch'en Tu's monotonous voice asked what he wanted.

"Mr. Carpenter," Humphrey said.

"One moment," Ch'en Tu's voice said. After a short wait, another voice spoke to Humphrey.

"Yes?" Alex said.

"This is Campbell," Humphrey said. "If you're through with it, you might bring me your father's new will."

There was the sound of a sharp, in-drawn breath on the other end of the line.

"You and your wife witnessed it," Humphrey went on. "I want it. I want to give it to some friends of mine. So rush it down here." He hung up, and wondered where his breakfast was. He was reaching for the bell when the nurse came in smiling, and put the tray across his chest. "Eat every bit of your porridge," she said. "It will make you big and strong. You'll need to be big and strong, because there's a guy downstairs who wants to see you, and he's immense. Shall I send him up?"

"What's his name?" Humphrey asked.

"He didn't say," the nurse said. "He said to tell you he met you one night outside the hotel."

"That's Joe," Humphrey said.

"Will you see him?"

Humphrey sighed. "Yes," he said, "I'll see him."

SUNLIGHT poured through the window, and one fugitive ray wove threads of gold through Katherine's hair. She sat in the armchair watching the man in the bed, but her mind wasn't entirely on him. Jay Martin sat beside her, and he was holding her right hand.

"The rest of the family couldn't come," Jay said. "Harry wanted to, really. But he had to be in Joaquin. He's preparing to defend a guy."

"Who?" Humphrey asked.

"My brother," Katherine said.

"Your which?" Humphrey stared.

"Her brother is a red," Jay said.

"Jay—" Katherine's voice had a note of warning in it.

"He's not a red," Jay said. "He just doesn't like cops."

"So that was it," Humphrey whistled through his teeth. "That's who I saw at the bridge." Katherine nodded. "I don't like cops, either," Humphrey said. "Bring him around some day."

"He'll be detained for a little while," Jay said. He saw Katherine bite her lip—and he slid an arm around her.

"Maybe I can help there," Humphrey said. "Last night Anders wanted to give me the county."

"I think he'll be reasonable," Jay said. "Did you see Grandma's letter in the paper?"

"I've got the original," Humphrey said. "Also the original of Mr. Winters' statement."

"That was in the paper too."

"This wasn't," Humphrey said, and he opened the drawer of the bedside table and took out a folded document. "You're an heiress, Miss Mesdrell."

Jay opened it, stared at the names of the witnesses at the foot, and started up.

"Sit down," Humphrey said. "What good does it do to get sore?"

"The sneaks!" Jay said. "When did they get it?"

"Just before Stephen was murdered," Humphrey explained. "Ella came downstairs to argue with Stephen, and to try to talk him out of changing his will. He wouldn't be talked out of it, made her go up and rout out Alex, and then had them witness it. Ella stormed out, taking the will with her. Burke was outside the window, and had to wait until they left."

Katherine's blue eyes got bigger than ever. "I thought I saw someone on the stairs. Maybe I saw them."

"I think you did," Humphrey agreed.

"Damn them!" Jay said.

"Not too much," Humphrey said. "What does it matter?"

"It doesn't matter," Katherine said.

"I suppose not," Jay said. He got up. "We'll run along. We've things to do."

The look in Katherine's eyes told Humphrey what those things were. He opened the drawer of the table again, took out a little book with a faded blue cover.

"Here's your wedding-present," Humphrey said. "She was in love too; only she wasn't so lucky."

Katherine came over, took it from him, suddenly bent and kissed his forehead. "You're a nice guy, Humphrey," Katherine said. She kissed him again. Right in the middle of it, Priscilla Anders shoved the door open.

She said: "Oh!"

"Come right in," Humphrey said. "Miss Mesdrell is just leaving."

Jay took her arm, grinned at Humphrey. "Thanks," Jay said. "Where do I send the check?"

"Here," Humphrey said. "I'll be here quite a while. Have a nice time."

"We will," Jay said. "We'll have a fine time." He grinned again, and left.

PRISCILLA pulled a chair close to the bed and sat down. She had on a green linen dress with a low neck, and she had omitted stockings. She looked very young. She asked, with far-away-ness in her eyes, "Are they going to get married?"

"I'm afraid so," Humphrey said. "They seemed a little bewildered."

"Isn't it romantic!" Priscilla said. "Him confessing so she wouldn't have to stay in jail. I'll bet she loves him. I'll bet she's proud of him."

"I'll bet she is," Humphrey said.

"I'm proud of you," Priscilla said.

"You've picked the wrong guy to be proud of," Humphrey said.

"You're so modest," Priscilla said.

"You've got me wrong," Humphrey said. "I'm not modest. I'm married."

"You're what?" Priscilla said.

"Married," Humphrey said.

"Oh," Priscilla said, and got up.

"I'm sorry," Humphrey said. "But maybe it's best. You're not in love with me, really. I'm new, and I seem to do exciting things. Joe's a lot better guy. Joe's a fine guy. He's a one-woman guy, Priscilla."

"Who said I was in love with you!" Priscilla said.

"Give Joe my love," Humphrey said. When she slammed the door, he wondered if you got gold stars in heaven for being noble. It was a new experience for him, this nobility business.

REAL EXPERIENCES

The Ambassador

MOST of us gaze with awe as well as envy at men in high places. Sometimes we are discouraged because we think these fortunate beings must have been given some intangible thing God has denied us. As a matter of fact, we needn't be discouraged. Comparatively few men are exceptional. It is only chance that makes them seem different. And the average man in a high place can make just as big a fool of himself as the average man in a lowlier place.

This may be, and probably is, a haywire philosophy. But I've felt this way ever since I had the honor of meeting Ambassador Ramblos. And the dignitaries whom I've met since then have done nothing to cause me to change my mind.

This man was his country's ambassador to Tokyo. His was an important nation, and he held an important post. His decisions carried considerable weight. At least they did in the Orient. It would seem such a position would be given to men of exceptional standing and ability. I don't know—but I'll tell you the story of Ramblos; you may judge for yourself.

Ramblos joined my ship at Kobe. His consul general, whom I knew and admired very much, brought him up to my quarters as soon as they came on board. I liked Ramblos at once. He was one of the smoothest, most ingratiating men imaginable, and we became very chummy.

A simple sailor like myself couldn't be blamed for feeling a bit flattered at being allowed to call such an exalted person by his first name. That was why I was so willing to oblige him when he asked me to put at our table two ladies who joined us at Manila. He said he had met them at some affair at the embassy in Tokyo.

When I met these ladies the warmth of my feelings for Ramblos began to cool. Both Mrs. X and her daughter Mary were frightful snobs. Originally Mrs. X was a pretty good sort. But old man X made a pot of money in stocks, and Mrs. X lost perspective. She became a climber, and Mary went along with her.

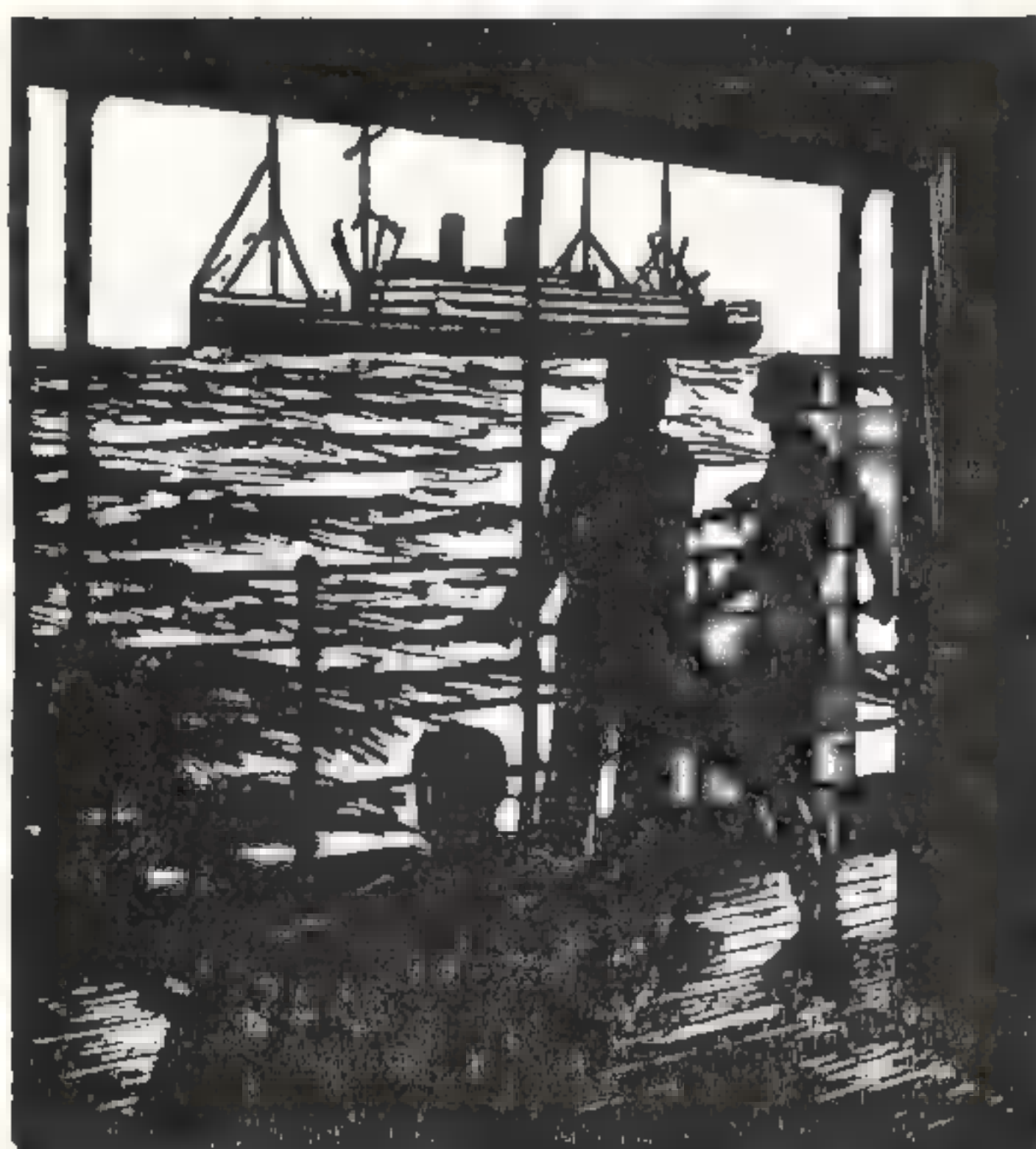
Before I found out how wealthy they were, I was at a loss to account for Ramblos' interest in them. It was he who enlightened me. He told me frankly that he had sent a cable to his embassy at Washington to find out their financial standing. When he received a favorable reply, he began giving Mary a big rush. Almost before I knew what was happening, he told me that he and Mary were engaged.

Like so many of his kind, Ramblos intended to marry money, and Mary looked like a sure bet to him. I don't know just what he intended to do with Mary after he married her. Certainly she could be no great help to him in his social contacts. And she was not even mildly good looking. But that was not too much against her. The wives of most famous men seldom are prize beauties. But Mary was crude, a regular little roughneck.

Unfortunately for his plans, Ramblos was incapable of sustained effort when it was as forced as was his love-making with Mary; he could not keep up the ardent courtship he had taught Mary to like and expect; when the bored man began to find excuses for staying away from her, Mary was more than a little hurt.

But Mary didn't love Ramblos. She thought she did, but it was only because he was such a glamorous figure. For instance, I am sure that even at the height of her fascination for Ramblos, she thought much less of him than she did her hats. For she was a nut about hats. She had three or four boxes crammed full of the oddest assortment of bonnets imaginable. Every time she appeared on deck, she would be wearing a different one. And each one was worse than the last. Her yen for hats was a standing joke among the other passengers.

When Ramblos began neglecting Mary, she sulked for a few days. Then she decided to do something about it. Her eyes lighted on the handsome features of the ship's surgeon. In a short time we had a first-class triangle on our hands.



I am afraid that Ramblos was receiving money from his government under false pretenses, for the ensuing days proved that he was no diplomat. When he noticed Mary's apparent interest in the surgeon, Ramblos became highly indignant. Probably his pride was hurt to think that a nobody like Mary would try to make a fool of the great Ramblos. After his first outburst, he sulked like a spoiled child for several days. That failing to bring Mary to time, he again flew into a violent rage, threatening all manner of consequences to the delighted girl.

HAD he been smart he would have married Mary without delay, for after a few weeks on board ship with the erratic diplomat, I don't believe that any girl in her right mind would marry him. She told me that she thought it was love at first sight, but after several violent quarrels she wasn't so sure. He spied on her, accused her of misconduct and acted in a most amazing manner. The payoff came after one night when Ramblos spotted Doc and Mary making their way up to the boat-deck.

It was after dinner. Mary was on the point of making up with Ramblos and took Doc up on the boat-deck to tell him about it. But the Ambassador saw them go up and planted himself at the foot of the stairs to see how long they would stay up. I suppose he intended to stay right by the ladder and confront them when they came down.

Mary, of course, did not know that Ramblos saw them go up. But when they started down a few moments later, she saw him, and she knew that he would cause a scene. For that reason she asked Doc to stay up there with her for a few moments until Ramblos moved on.

That was all right with Doc, and they sat down to wait. But when midnight came and the "diplomat" was still there,

In this department our readers meet to tell the true stories of their most exciting hours. First a passenger-ship captain tells why he doesn't think much of diplomats.

By CAPTAIN WILBUR ROSS

Mary became frantic. She still cared enough for Ramblos not to want to lose him.

Doc was a good scout. When he saw how she felt, he told her that if she could climb, there was another way that they could get down without Ramblos seeing them—a small upright iron ladder on the forward part of the boat-deck that the sailors used to reach the boat-deck when they were in a hurry. Ramblos didn't know about that one. Mary was active, and in a few moments they had scrambled down the other ladder and she went to her room.

Still believing Mary to be on the boat-deck with Doc, the Ambassador sat at the foot of the ladder until four in the morning. The night watchman told me that at that time Ramblos snatched the flashlight from him and ran like mad up to the boat-deck. He flashed the light into every boat and recess up there, and carried on at a great rate. When Ramblos failed to find them, he threw the watchman's flashlight overboard and ran below like a wild man. I tried to explain to him afterward what had happened, but I was unable to convince him.

NEXT day when Ramblos asked Mary where she had been the previous night, she asserted that she hadn't felt well and had stayed in her room. That of course, was untrue, and when she decided to make a clean breast of the whole affair, Ramblos was sure she was lying again, and caused such a scene that she ran to her room crying.

The climax, however, came that evening after dinner.

Ramblos had not been down for lunch; neither was he down for dinner. Mary was half crying during dinner, and her mother was no great help, for she was angry with her daughter because she had jeopardized her chances of marrying Ramblos. Mrs. X was intensely in favor of the marriage. She had already begun practicing to say: "My son-in-law, the Ambassador."

We left the table as quickly as possible. I returned to my room rather disgusted. Both Ramblos and Mary used me as a weeping-wall, and I was fed up with listening to what seemed to me like a lot of nonsense. Shortly after I reached my room Mary came flying in. She was hysterical with shock and grief. I couldn't make sense from what she tried to tell me, and I was glad when her mother came puffing in a few seconds behind her. Between us we managed to quiet her enough to get her story.

She said that when she returned to her room after dinner, she found Ramblos there. He had found all her hats and the boxes, which he had thrown on the cabin floor. He was stamping on them like a crazy man. She shouted at him, but when he started toward her, she ran as fast as she could to my room.

I left the two women in my room and ran down to see what I could do with Ramblos. When I reached the room, he was pushing the last of the hat-boxes through the porthole.

It was some time before I quieted him enough to talk sensibly. And even then it didn't make sense to me. When I asked why he had thrown all her hats overboard, he tried to tell me that he did it to show how much he loved Mary. He said he knew that Mary was inordinately fond of those hats. To destroy them, would be almost the biggest crime he could commit in her eyes. He said his love was so great that he must bring a great shame on the name of Ramblos, to prove to Mary how much he loved her!

It was too much for my feeble mind to grasp, and I told him he had better go to my room with me and try to explain it to Mary. He said he would be very glad to, and was sure that his little Mary would understand.

But when we arrived there, both Mary and her mother proved even dumber than I, and Mrs. X was almost as rough on him as Mary. I actually felt sorry for the poor devil when those two women really let loose on him.

Poor Ramblos actually tore his hair in an effort to convince Mary of his sincerity. But it was no use; it was too intricate for Mary to grasp. Like myself, she could not appreciate the subtleties or finer shadings of a mind accustomed to the sanctified atmosphere of high diplomacy. Mary was unable to think of it as anything but a dirty trick, and she broke off their engagement in language that even Ramblos could understand.

Pioneer

*Hard fighting in the World
War campaign against
the Germans in Africa.*

WE lay just behind the crest of one of the inner sand-dunes at Grassplatz, looking over the yellow hell of the inner Namib Desert. It was early morning, and the sun had not yet set the mirages dancing to destroy the visibility. Thirty miles away in the center of a great flat plain, several little white metal match-boxes denoted the corrugated-iron buildings of Tchaukaib station. Another red metal match-box mounted on four match-sticks was its water-tank. Five miles behind us was Kolmanskop, with its towering diamond-mining machinery, held by us. Tchaukaib was held by the Germans. In between stretched thirty-five miles of no-man's-land, flat desert below sea-level where the thermometer registered 140° Fahrenheit at midday, and dropped to 40° at night.

Between us and Tchaukaib a thin column of dust towered skyward a thousand feet or more on the still morning air—dust from a German patrol which we were watching—Piet Uys, Fox and I.

"This is a queer war," remarked Piet to me, thoughtfully. "When I rode with Dewet in the Boer War, we fought always against odds. Sometimes as few as thirty of us were maneuvering against thousands of the British, because there were no more of us. But here thirty of us maneuver against the Germans, while two thousand of our horsemen and eight thousand foot soldiers stay in Luderitz-bucht."

"Smuts and Botha know what they are doing," I rejoined.

"Louis Botha and Janie Smuts are *slim Kerels*," he remarked. "Demilion is another. They could not have done much without the knowledge that Demilion gave them. —Look out, Fox, here comes the *Baas*," he added.

Stumbling almost knee-deep in the loose sand of the dune, Demilion scrambled up beside us and his eyes flickered over the desert.

of Africa

By PETER
RAINIER



"Which way is that patrol moving?" he asked.

"They left Tchaukaib at dawn. Seem to be heading for that long ridge to our left where we had that affair last week."

"Fox, go down and tell General Mackenzie there's a German patrol in sight. You'll find him waiting where we left our horses. Says he wants some sport."

The General returned with Fox, breasting the sand slope gallantly in spite of his short legs, and swearing fearsomely.

"You scouts get all the fun," Mackenzie rumbled, extracting a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of a skin-tight pair of riding-breeches, taking one and tossing the packet to Piet. "Where's that patrol, Demilion? Any chance of cutting them off? I want a ride after something—and a bit of shooting."

"Once they are behind the ridge, we can cut in behind them," replied Demilion, watching the distant patrol.

An hour later they were out on the flat desert, cantering steadily forward. General Mackenzie was mounted on a great spanking chestnut of his own breeding. Behind him rode his galloper, Corrie, on what looked like the chestnut's blood brother.

Corrie was a well-known figure in the expeditionary force. He was some distant relation of the General's. He could not have been more than fifteen years old, and looked like a little cherub perched on the great horse, but could ride like an Irish foxhunting squire.

For some miles we rode along the railway line. There were no trains on it, for the simple reason that the methodical Germans had blown a chunk out of the center of each rail.

The line was being as methodically laid behind us by the P.B.I. (Poor Bloody Infantry). They lifted each rail and sent it back to a homemade machine-shop in Luderitzbucht. There the ragged section in the center was laboriously hacksawed out. Then, after drilling

holes for bolts, the two short sections were shipped back to railhead to be re-laid. In this way the line crept forward slowly into the desert, a few hundred yards each day. When it had moved forward a few miles beyond the railhead camp, the army marched forward, and again sat down at the end of it.

We reached the farther end of the long ridge before the Germans emerged from behind the other. We were now between them and their lines without their having discovered us.

The scouts split. Half rode with Demilion round one end of the ridge; the General led the rest of us round the other.

"Any news, sir?" I asked the General.

"Yes. Good news. Botha and Smuts smashed the rebels. Things will begin to move here soon. There are some Germans—half a dozen of them! Let's after the devils!"

The Germans had rounded a spur of the ridge a couple of hundred yards away, riding toward us. When they saw us, they turned and galloped back the way they had come. The General was after them, Corrie at his heels. The rest of us slowed up. There was no use in killing our troop-horses by trying to keep up with a pair of thoroughbreds.

THE Germans disappeared round the edge of the ridge. They were met by some scattering shots from Demilion's party, and they doubled back, almost riding down the General, who emptied a saddle with a shot from his pistol. They swerved away from us again and rode out into the desert, the General and Corrie still at their heels.

We were now all clear of the ridge, between it and the sand-dunes from which we had started. The scouts extended to assume a horseshoe formation, its open

end to the dunes. We moved forward gradually, herding pursuers and pursued away from the German lines and nearer to the dunes. Once arrived at that barrier, which was impassable at that spot, we closed in and effected the capture.

By the time the point of our horseshoe was within easy rifle-shot of the sand-dunes, the remaining Germans saw they were surrounded. They came riding toward us with their hands in the air.

SHIPS now began to steam into Luderitz Bay, bringing our badly needed supplies. A shipload of new rails speeded progress across the desert.

In one long night march we bridged the gap to Tchaukaib, just too late to catch the Germans there, who had got wind of our coming. Five thousand men were camped on the scorching flat around the water-tank, from whose top an infantry lookout searched the horizon continually. Five thousand men were waiting for the next move forward, gazing longingly at the black line of the Aus Mountains, fifty miles to the eastward.

"Air parade" began at daybreak and ended about eight A.M., by which hour the desert mirages had made flying impracticable for the German planes. The whole force would scatter into the desert in extended formation and pass the time grooming horses, cleaning kit and betting as to the number of German planes which would come over, the number of bombs they would drop, and whether they would bag any of the field artillery who were left in camp to fight an unequal duel with them. Three G's on the infantry bugle from the lookout on the water-tank was the alarm signal for an air-raid.

The German planes were kitelike affairs which made a noise like motor bicycles climbing a hill. They had the best of the game, for we had no planes at all, nor any high-angle guns capable of firing at a plane directly overhead.

Our gunners would give them a peppering till they got in too close for the maximum elevations of the guns. Then the gunners would scatter hurriedly, throwing themselves on their faces in the sand and wishing they had been born with less conspicuous hinder parts. The Germans would drop their load of home-made bombs—stuffed with dynamite, scrap-iron, horseshoe-nails and any other unpleasant and painful substances the Germans had. The planes would circle over the prostrate gunners like a couple of attenuated and deformed vultures cir-

cling over a carcass to make sure that it is dead. Then the planes would sail for the horizon while the gunners rushed for their guns to get a bit of their own back before the target got out of range.

Several times a week Demilion would lead our patrol out from Tchaukaib camp. We would ride all night toward the German position at the mouth of the gorge, which was the only passage through the Aus Mountains to the interior plateau. All next day we would lie hidden behind the crest of some rocky ridge or kopje in the desert, noting German troop movements, ambushing any of their patrols which were not too strong for us to tackle, baking from the blazing sun on our backs and frying from the hot rocks on which we lay, creeping under our horses' bellies for the shade when the sun got overhead. The next night we would ride back to camp to report.

There was one particular German patrol which seemed always to frequent the neighborhood of a rocky ridge called Garub, some five miles out in the desert from the wide triangle of rocky cliffs which was the entrance to the Aus gorge. General Mackenzie decided on a reconnaissance in force to catch them.

There was the usual chill feel about the desert air which we already knew so well from numberless other night marches—the whole desert hereabouts was criss-crossed with our tracks. We had been on active service six months. We had captured a few hundred square miles of desert which was incapable of supporting human life except by supplies brought in from South Africa. We had had dozens of petty skirmishes with German patrols—killed and taken a few Germans, had a few killed on our side. War!

A REMARK from Fox woke me from my dream:

"Thank God we're not trailing those blasted guns tonight!"

"That is bad," said Piet Uys. "God sometimes seems to fight on the side of the Amalekites. That is when we need the guns. If those German *schelms* should get behind the rocks of a kopje—the guns are needed. When I rode in Dewet's commando, fighting the British, we weren't afraid of many times our number of riflemen if we had good cover. But when we saw the guns, we rode like hell."

As day broke, we spread our net of horsemen between the Garub ridge and the mouth of the Aus gorge, the long line enveloping the ridge on three sides.

Slowly as the light strengthened, we rode up the smooth slope of sand toward the jagged wall of rock which formed the crest of the ridge. Eight hundred yards from the top—seven hundred yards—the nest is empty; another wild-goose chase, ten hours' ride back to camp, all for nothing. . . . Six hundred yards—

"*Ka-ka-ka-ka-ka*," coughed a machine-gun from the rocks above. Several others joined in.

"*Sst—sst—sst*," bullets sighed past our heads, as though in sorrow at missing us.

Numbers One, Two and Four of each section hit the ground simultaneously, flat on their bellies without recollection of how they got there. Number Threes galloped off to the rear, each leading three horses.

We had caught a Tartar on the Garub ridge, and the Garub fight was on.

I WRIGGLED my elbows into an easier position, raised my head cautiously, looking for something to shoot. At my movement the sand around me became agitated with little spurts of dust. Something stung my face. I lay flat again. The dust spurts ceased.

Then, at a blast from a whistle somewhere to my right, the whole line rose as one man, dashed forward thirty yards or so, flung themselves on their bellies again as the machine-guns began coughing.

Piet Uys called me from where he lay a couple of yards to my left. I turned my head gingerly toward him, trying not to attract the attention of the Germans. Piet was plucking branches from a small spiny desert plant which grew within his reach and decorating his hat with them.

"The Lord protects his servants when they look after themselves a bit," he remarked coolly, donning his hat. "When we rush, the devil-gun fires blindly into the thick of us and does little damage because we are far apart and the gunner is flurried by our rush. When we lie still is the danger. When the machine-gunner sees a head move, he knows that the man who owns it is alive and fires at him—hits him often too, because he is firing at a mark. Now when I move my head, my hat looks like a bush waving; when you move, your hat looks like a hat, and they fire at it, while leaving me alone."

I promptly decorated my hat from a bush near me.

We advanced by short rushes to within four hundred yards of the German position. We were now close enough to see loopholes built in the rock walls which

connected the natural defense of boulders around the top of the ridge. Now and then a puff of wind came down the slope toward us, and I smelt a scent like the hot engine of a car—it was the heated barrel of a machine-gun. Occasionally one of those guns would overheat, and a small jet of white steam from the water-jacket outline itself against the black rocks, drawing a rattle of rifle-fire from our prone line, which was answered in turn by a rising crescendo of machine-gun fire from above. The fire on both sides would reach its peak, then die away.

To advance to closer range against those hidden machine-guns would mean useless loss of life. By waiting for the darkness, we could get close enough to rush the position and swamp the defenders with our numbers. It was nearly noon now. Seven hours to wait.

There was an order coming down the line from the right—Mackenzie and his staff were over in that direction, I knew. I could see each head turn from right to left as it passed the order on—"Prepare to retire."

Was the General mad? We'd lose almost as many men by retiring as we would by rushing the position. Besides, we could easily stick it out till darkness—then we'd have the game in our hands.

I passed the message on.

At the sound of the whistle, the line rose suddenly, as though pushed up by invisible springs, turned and raced madly down the slope to meet the dust-cloud thrown up by the Number Threes, who were bringing up the horses at the gallop.

But beyond them was another dust-cloud, two dust-clouds. From the mouth of the Aus gorge two long columns of Germans were coming at a gallop, not a mile away, already turning inward, forming a pair of pincers with which to nip us after they had us surrounded.

THE German patrol in the rocks had been a bait—and we had bitten nicely. The machine-guns had been planted on the ridge to hold us in play while we were being surrounded. And now it would be touch and go—we would have to gallop hard to get clear, and run the gantlet of the machine-guns to do it.

The horses met us in a flurry of dust, churning hoofs and swearing men.

As we passed close under one end of the ridge, the machine-guns opened on us again. We galloped through a dust-cloud perforated by sighing bullets, every man leaning low on the saddle.

Fox is down, headfirst in the sand. He is up and running hard—not hit, apparently, just fallen off. Piet has caught his horse and brought it back to him, held it while he mounted. Good for the Boer! God—those Germans are close! Can see their faces, not two hundred yards away, riding abreast of us, trying to turn back the rearguard. What's Demilion up to? Swinging out of our mass toward them—crazy devil, he'll get caught. Letting fly at them with his pistol as he gallops—the old Boer trick, shooting on the run. Piet is out there too, shooting from the saddle with his rifle. Got to follow them. We're pulling clear we're *clear*; the Germans have halted. Came near to catching us—but didn't quite do it.

Once out in the plain, we formed up and waited for the enemy. But he was not going to risk open fighting on the plain where we could outmaneuver him.

We were now facing the really strong position of Aus, which the Germans evidently intended to dispute. The Aus Mountains, at whose feet we lay, stretched impassable from north to south, waterless, sand-blown into weird shapes, polished like glass. The only pass was the Aus gorge, twenty miles long, in places only fifty yards wide, reputedly mined. Defending the mouth of the gorge at our end was a system of German trenches whose exact location we had as yet been unable to determine. There was nothing for us to do but wait until Botha and Smuts should find some way of breaking the stalemate.

Meanwhile leave was granted to a number of the mounted men, whose usefulness was limited at the moment by the nearness of the German lines. I jumped at the chance. I would go to Beacon Hill farm and try my luck. Queer how often I thought about a girl I hadn't seen for nearly eight years!

THE morning of my departure I watched Demilion ride out with three men to scout the entrance to the Aus gorge. It was the last time I ever saw him. They stumbled on a concealed German trench and were enfiladed by a machine-gun at fifty yards range. Two troopers and all the horses were killed at the first discharge. The other trooper was wounded, but survived and told me the story of Demilion's end long afterward, when we took our prisoners back at Gibeon fight.

Demilion lay wounded behind his dead horse. A German officer called:

"Put your hands up, Demilion; we've got you."

"Get your head down; I'm going to fight," replied Demilion.

Demilion's body was riddled with machine-gun bullets and the Germans buried him where he fell. Cold, ruthless, utterly daring and very lovable, he was one of South Africa's great guerrilla fighters.

IT was evening before the slow supply train put me in Luderitzbucht, where I was to catch my boat next day.

Hungry for something to eat besides bully beef and dog biscuit, I went to the South African Garrison Institute to buy sardines, cheese, raisins and half a dozen other delicacies about which I had dreamed so often in the long night marches. I walked up to the counter and gazed around, awaiting my turn.

"You wouldn't be looking for a passage on a guano schooner, sir?" came a voice in my ear.

I started. There was Walter Airey in a white apron, serving sardines and cheese, the same wry grin upon his face that he had worn the day we found the first diamond on our prospecting trip in the desert.

Walter and I traveled on the same boat to Capetown next day. I have never seen him since we stood for the second time on the Capetown dock. . . .

Two days after leaving Capetown, I stepped off the train at Estcourt station. Winnie met me with the car and drove me to Beacon Hill. When I left to re-join after my two weeks' leave was up, I was an engaged man, to be married as soon as the war was over. . . .

I got back from my leave just in time for the big move, for which we had waited so long. General Vanderventer, with commandoes of hard-riding Boer burghers, was threatening at Keetmanshoek the communications of the German force which held the gorge before us.

Major Grey, late of the Carbineers, had been given command of the scouts. He was a splendid soldier but lacked Demilion's knowledge of the country.

I was scared, dead scared, as I rode in the first section at the head of the long column which was marching up the Aus gorge. There were two troopers ahead, but the flanking parties which military tactics and ordinary prudence called for would have had to fly to scale those smooth rock walls on either side. It had been reported that the gorge was mined. The soles of my feet prickled uneasily.

The Mechanism of Mind



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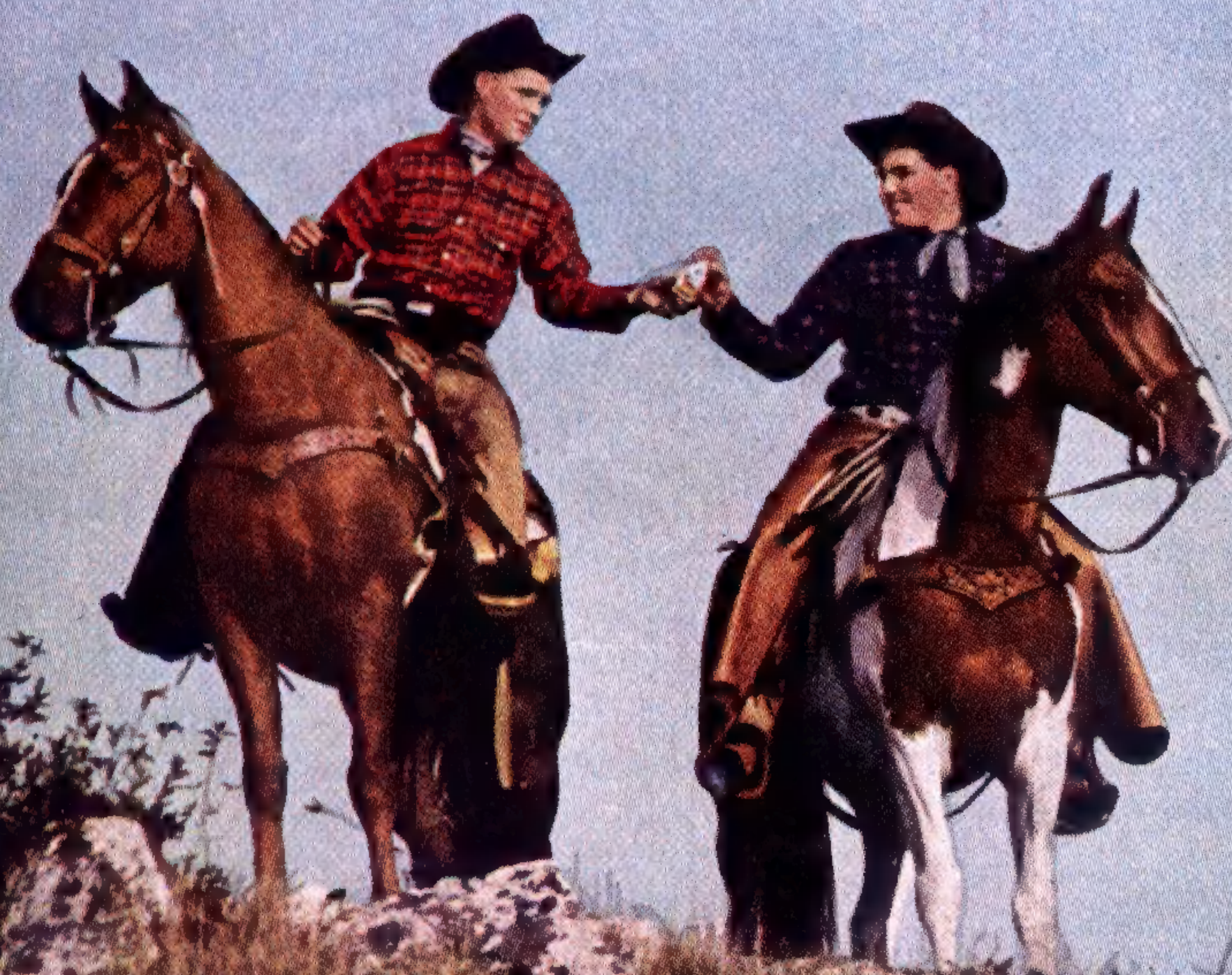
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